



N-power

Empowerment pilot project Evaluation report

LEMA Laboratory

University of Liege

Authors: Clémentine Schelings, Stephanie Van Doosselaere

December 2021



1.	Introduction.....	6
1.1.	Evaluation.....	6
1.2.	Presentation of the N-power project	6
1.3.	General Objectives	6
1.3.1.	Integrate an empowerment approach into the city administration.....	7
1.3.2.	Change the roles of civil servants in order to be suitable for empowering citizens.....	7
1.3.3.	Increase/develop citizen’s individual and collective capacities	8
2.	Methodology.....	9
2.1.	Working methodology.....	9
2.2.	Evaluation methods.....	9
2.2.1.	Specific interviews and surveys	9
2.2.2.	Evaluation participatory meetings.....	9
3.	Presentation of the pilot projects and involved actors.....	10
3.1.	Genk – City Centre.....	10
3.1.1.	Brief description of the project.....	10
3.1.2.	Context of the neighbourhood (spatial, socio-economic, economic and institutional)..	10
3.1.3.	Specific objectives	11
3.2.	Genk – Nomadland.....	11
3.2.1.	Brief description of the project.....	11
3.2.2.	Context of the neighbourhood (spatial, socio-economic, economic and institutional)..	12
3.2.3.	Specific objectives	12
3.3.	Liège – I am writing in the City	12
3.3.1.	Brief description of the project.....	12
3.3.2.	Context of the neighbourhood (spatial, socio-economic, economic and institutional)..	13
3.3.3.	Specific objectives	13
3.4.	Liege – Around the pond	14
3.4.1.	Brief description of the project.....	14
3.4.2.	Context of the neighbourhood (spatial, socio-economic, economic and institutional)..	14
3.4.3.	Specific objectives	14
3.4.4.	Additional objective for both pilots in Liège.....	15
3.5.	Seraing – Parks Marêts and Morchamps.....	15
3.5.1.	Brief description of the project.....	15
3.5.2.	Context of the neighbourhood (spatial, socio-economic, economic and institutional)..	15
3.5.3.	Specific objectives	16
3.6.	Eupen – Park Loten.....	16

3.6.1.	Brief description of the project.....	16
3.6.2.	Context of the neighbourhood (spatial, socio-economic, economic and institutional)..	17
3.6.3.	Specific objectives	17
3.7.	Verviers – Prés-Javais neighbourhood.....	18
3.7.1.	Brief description of the project.....	18
3.7.2.	Context of the neighbourhood (spatial, socio-economic, economic and institutional)..	18
3.7.3.	Specific objectives	19
3.8.	Aachen – Aachen East and North	20
3.8.1.	Brief description of the project.....	20
3.8.2.	Context of the neighbourhood (spatial, socio-economic, economic and institutional)..	20
3.8.3.	Specific objectives	20
3.9.	Heerlen – micro-initiatives in Heerlen North.....	21
3.9.1.	Brief description of the project.....	21
3.9.2.	Context of the neighbourhood (spatial, socio-economic, economic and institutional)..	22
3.9.3.	Specific objectives	23
4.	Empowerment method implemented.....	24
4.1.	Genk – City centre	24
4.1.1.	Tools and methods implemented to reach the specific objectives	24
4.1.2.	Communication and engagement strategies.....	24
4.1.3.	Involved actors, their roles and relationships.....	25
4.1.4.	Challenges and adaptations.....	26
4.1.5.	Impacts on the neighbourhood	26
4.2.	Genk – Nomadland.....	27
4.2.1.	Tools and methods implemented to reach the specific objectives	27
4.2.2.	Communication and engagement strategies.....	28
4.2.3.	Involved actors, their roles and relationships.....	28
4.2.4.	Challenges and adaptations.....	28
4.2.5.	Impacts on the neighbourhood	29
4.2.6.	Additional transversal information for both pilot projects in Genk.....	29
4.3.	Liege – I write in the City	29
4.3.1.	Tools and methods implemented to reach the specific objectives	29
4.3.2.	Communication and engagement strategies.....	30
4.3.3.	Involved actors, their roles and relationships.....	30
4.3.4.	Challenges and adaptations.....	31
4.3.5.	Impacts on the neighbourhood	32
4.4.	Liege – Around the pond	32

4.4.1.	Tools and methods implemented to reach the specific objectives	32
4.4.2.	Communication and engagement strategies.....	33
4.4.3.	Involved actors, their roles and relationships.....	34
4.4.4.	Challenges and adaptations.....	34
4.4.5.	Impacts on the neighbourhood	34
4.4.6.	Additional transversal information for both pilot projects in Liège.....	35
4.5.	Seraing – Parks Marêts and Morchamps.....	36
4.5.1.	Tools and methods implemented to reach the specific objectives	36
4.5.2.	Communication and engagement strategies.....	37
4.5.3.	Involved actors, their roles and relationships.....	37
4.5.4.	Challenges and adaptations.....	38
4.5.5.	Impacts on the neighbourhood	39
4.6.	Eupen – Park Loten.....	40
4.6.1.	Tools and methods implemented to reach the specific objectives	40
4.6.2.	Communication and engagement strategies.....	41
4.6.3.	Involved actors, their roles and relationships.....	41
4.6.4.	Challenges and adaptations.....	42
4.6.5.	Impacts on the neighbourhood	42
4.7.	Verviers – Prés-Javais neighbourhood.....	43
4.7.1.	Tools and methods implemented to reach the specific objectives	43
4.7.2.	Communication and engagement strategies.....	43
4.7.3.	Involved actors, their roles and relationships.....	44
4.7.4.	Challenges and adaptations.....	44
4.7.5.	Impacts on the neighbourhood	45
4.8.	Aachen – Aachen east and North	46
4.8.1.	Tools and methods implemented to reach the specific objectives	46
4.8.2.	Communication and engagement strategies.....	46
4.8.3.	Involved actors, their roles and relationships.....	46
4.8.4.	Challenges and adaptations.....	47
4.8.5.	Impacts on the neighbourhood	47
	What is the impact on the residents?.....	Erreur ! Signet non défini.
4.9.	Heerlen – micro-initiatives in Heerlen North.....	48
4.9.1.	Tools and methods implemented to reach the specific objectives	48
4.9.2.	Communication and engagement strategies.....	48
4.9.3.	Involved actors, their roles and relationships.....	49
4.9.4.	Challenges and adaptations.....	49

4.9.5.	Impacts on the neighbourhood	50
5.	Results and evaluation.....	51
5.1.	Governance	51
5.1.1.	Political vision and administrative organization	51
5.1.2.	Adoption of neighborhood regeneration and empowerment approaches.....	52
5.1.3.	Place-, people- or community-based strategies	53
5.1.4.	Relationship between citizens and local authority	55
5.2.	Empowerment.....	58
5.2.1.	Methods and tools.....	58
5.2.2.	Project-based or community-based strategies.....	59
5.2.3.	Participatory awareness and recognition	60
5.3.	Barriers and their impacts on the pilot projects.....	61
5.3.1.	The Covid-19 pandemic.....	61
5.3.2.	City administrative and financial rules.....	62
5.3.3.	Hard-to-reach groups	63
5.4.	Sustainability.....	64
6.	Conclusions and perspectives.....	66

1. Introduction

1.1. Evaluation

The main goal of this evaluation is to report on how the N-power project effectively contributed to support innovative 'neighbourhood development policies' enabling the EMR cities to effectively reintegrate their 'excluded' neighbourhoods and populations in a creative, inclusive and sustainable development pathway. This by contributing to the reduction of environmental inequalities between neighbourhoods and to the economic revitalisation of the deprived neighbourhoods through the creation of new local activities and jobs, but also, to the social development of neighbourhoods (through effects in terms of e.g. community learning, social integration, social cohesion and collective organisational capacity).

1.2. Presentation of the N-power project

The Interreg N-power project promotes empowerment as a way to better integrate social and environmental, but also economic objectives of Neighbourhood renewal. In this context, it understands empowerment as giving more opportunities and power to citizens to implement their ideas for their neighbourhood. Hence, they are encouraged to participate in public debate and local decision-making, to better organize themselves collectively as a neighbourhood community and to develop and implement their own projects that will have positive effects both for them personally and for the neighbourhood. Capacitation through offering citizens opportunities for learning, developing their skills and capacities, their social and cultural capitals, for developing personal and collective projects is thus a central component of the model promoted by the Interreg N-power project. Seven Cities from the Euregio Meuse-Rhine are partners of this project: Liège, Seraing, Verviers, Eupen and Genk (Belgium), Heerlen (Netherlands) and Aachen (Germany). They benefit from guidance and funding in order to implement a pilot empowerment project in a specific neighbourhood. These pilot projects are to be used as an opportunity for the local authorities (LAs) to test innovative empowerment approaches in the context of NR and therefore to develop their skills and capacities in this matter.

This N-power project's aim was to continue the dynamics started during the SUN Interreg project. The SUN project as an action-research project provided the opportunity to experiment different devices that aim to develop different aspects of sustainable urban development on the neighbourhood level: social cohesion, greening, energy saving and local economic development.

Indeed, some partners (Genk, Liege, Eupen, Aachen), were already in the process of the SUN project and had the opportunity to deepen some processes already tested before in SUN.

1.3. General Objectives

The neighbourhoods targeted by the N-power action research and their population are considered as "excluded" from the rest of the city. They often serve as a place of reception for newcomers, and are therefore characterized by a precarious population, a strong multiculturality, a high turnover of inhabitants who are "in transit" and tend to leave the district as soon as possible, with an unattractive image linked to the abundance of garbage on the street, vandalism and lack of investment (dilapidated buildings, low maintenance etc.).

In these districts, a vicious circle has gradually set in where degradation of the living environment and impoverishment feed each other: the district is no longer sufficiently attractive and therefore a significant part of its population is captive in the circumstances and waiting for the chance to leave the neighbourhood as soon as possible.

These neighbourhoods would benefit from a more integral approach for developing the spatial as well as the social environments in order to break the vicious circle of physical and civic disinvestment. More

concretely, it is a question of building bridges between the more “social” policies and the more “spatial” policies so that they work more closely together and strengthen each other.

In order to develop these neighbourhoods, these policies should focus on strengthening the assets of these communities such as diversity of cultures, tacit knowledge and green spaces in which meeting each other is possible. All this can highly contribute to improving the quality of life at the neighbourhood level.

Public spaces (green spaces in particular) therefore play a central role and are real places for living, meeting, exchanging and supporting the quality of life together. These common spaces contribute to the revitalization of vulnerable and difficult city neighbourhoods and help to improve the quality of life in them. However, they are still too often subject to degradation and misuse due to over-occupation, inappropriate use or lack of management and investment.

1.3.1. Integrate an empowerment approach into the city administration

The ideal type of neighbourhood renewal policy referred to in this action-research project, incorporates the empowerment model in the sense that it seeks to promote active citizens and communities unlike the limited participatory approaches usually present in the traditional approaches. The latter are indeed often based on citizens’ consultation, which does not allow them to become actors of change, making decisions or taking concrete action (Brody et al., 2003; Healey, 1997). Empowerment strategies, on the contrary, aim to give the power to the citizens to work together and improve quality-of-life in the neighbourhoods (Macleavy, 2009). Such a process may able citizens to develop their individual and collective learning capacities and ensure community development. This concept is thus also understood here as helping (deprived) communities become more organized and allow the excluded to gain access to the benefits of society as job opportunities, social integration, etc. (Middleton et al., 2005).

Empowerment is promoted to enhance involvement, commitment and ownership of neighbourhoods by the inhabitants in order to build stronger communities. To achieve this form of empowerment, it requires even more political will to give up the paradigm of rules and control in order to let citizens form a self-organized community. It is mainly explained by the complete mindshift and political will to consider inhabitants as partners in the project and not as clients of the city. Therefore, competences of the city officers are not to be neglected because in this new model they should somehow abandon their “expert role” in favour of a facilitating role.

1.3.2. Change the roles of civil servants in order to be suitable for empowering citizens

Empowering people and communities is a process that takes time and which also constitutes a governance transition. Revising public governance methods, like any social innovation, is indeed not always self-evident. It implies important changes in the postures and practices of all actors involved. On the one hand, some citizens, accustomed to positioning themselves as “clients” of the public authorities, are not necessarily inclined to redefine themselves as actors in the city. On the other hand, for some public decision-makers, after decades of rather “interventionist” public policy, it is a matter of listening more to citizens articulating their need, of trusting them, of accepting that they are no longer the only actors in charge and redefining themselves as facilitators and guarantors of the general interest.

The position of public authorities must gradually evolve, also according to the “maturity” of citizens and associative actors in terms of participation. In the most vulnerable neighbourhoods, citizens are not necessarily willing to participate in the dynamics of their neighbourhood. It is something that must often be encouraged, little by little, with great patience and perseverance. Moreover, there is no miracle recipe that can be applied everywhere and in all cases. Each method must be adapted to the context and its specificities, and transposed.

The future of the government in community building, is that they will no longer have a clear central role, they will be a complement in the network. Ideally, it’s no longer about bottom-up or top-down, but “from all sides” as long as everyone finds his/her place in the network. As defined, politics has to be the

emanation of the citizens. Therefore, when searching for the common interest, as local authority, it is necessary to have a threefold role:

- support (financially, physically or...);
- facilitate;
- protect.

This, in order to regain trust from the citizens towards the local authorities and the other way around.

1.3.3. Increase/develop citizen's individual and collective capacities

Citizens are the key actors in empowerment approaches as they have the responsibility to create/design places for their neighbourhood. As explained, a strong political will makes it possible to consider inhabitants as partners in the project and not as clients of the City. Through the articulation of roles mentioned above, citizens are encouraged to form a community and gain more control over decisions that influence their lives through a shift in relationship between themselves and city actors. However, to obtain or retain this autonomy, trust is necessary among citizens and between the communities and city actors. On the one hand, the municipality must dare to transfer responsibility to the citizen(s), to let go of ownership. But on the other hand, the citizen(s) have to experience ownership of their own neighbourhood, because no initiative exists without an owner. Recognizing citizens as real partners in projects educates a new relationship between citizens and government, whereby the focus is more set on networks - network society. The facilitating role as mentioned above, encourages committed people to mobilize their own network and skills, and to start interacting with others to create small communities by reaching out to, connecting and trusting people. These engaged communities can then generate enthusiasm from other inhabitants so that they undertake initiatives themselves or help spread the method and its outcomes.

Empowerment can be promoted as a way to better integrate social and environmental, but also economic aspects and objectives of neighbourhood renewal. Empowerment is understood as giving more power to citizens in the management of their local environment, in the sense that they are encouraged and supported to participate to public debate and to decision-making, but also to develop and implement their own projects (that will have positive effects both for them and for the neighbourhood), as well as to better organize themselves collectively as a neighbourhood community. Capacitation through offering citizens opportunities for learning, developing their social and cultural capitals, and progressively supporting a form of community development is thus central in the model promoted by the N-power project.

2. Methodology

2.1. Working methodology

The general methodology used throughout the N-power project was the action-research. The use of this working methodology was aimed at stimulating the collective development of innovative tools and practices of public intervention to support sustainable development of urban neighbourhoods. Researchers and practitioners have been working closely throughout the project.

An important element of the working methodology was the implementation of regular partner meetings and a training program since the very beginning of the N-power project. The members of the partner meetings were the official partners of the project and sometimes their colleagues from other departments: City of Liege, City of Seraing, City of Verviers, City of Eupen, City of Genk, City of Aachen, City of Heerlen, University of Liege (LEMA), University of Hasselt and Zuyd.

During the training program, in addition to these official partners, various other city officers have been invited to take part to the reflexion.

2.2. Evaluation methods

This report builds on various exercises that were all aimed at evaluating the N-power project actions and more generally to better understand how the concerned neighbourhoods were evolving:

2.2.1. Specific interviews and surveys

Specific evaluation actions were organised to evaluate specific actions, methods and tools developed during the N-power project. Interviews with city officers, project managers and citizens were performed by ULg-LEMA for every pilot project. A survey was sent out to all official partners in order to complete the interviews.

2.2.2. Evaluation participatory meetings

In complement to the interviews, participatory meetings were organised to evaluate specific actions developed during the N-power project.

All these exercises contributed to gather information and data of different nature which were useful to evaluate and understand the impact of the N-power project on the development of the concerned neighbourhoods.

3. Presentation of the pilot projects and involved actors

3.1. Genk – City Centre

3.1.1. Brief description of the project

Building on its former mining heritage, the City of Genk has institutionalized a neighbourhood regeneration approach since several years. This stems from a deep political engagement both to change relations between citizens and local governments and to support citizens' participation and initiatives at the neighbourhood level. Starting from deprived districts, this strategy was then extended progressively to every district but the city centre left behind. The general objective of this pilot project is to **develop and implement this innovative neighbourhood management approach in Genk Centrum**. This approach will **improve social cohesion, include most vulnerable inhabitants and tackle deprivation at the neighbourhood level**. In practice, the role of the neighbourhood manager is to encourage citizens to initiate and implement small projects, to stimulate personal empowerment and to connect people with different backgrounds. Citizens' initiatives contribute to improve the quality of life in their neighbourhood (e.g., a dog park, Textiel activities).

3.1.2. Context of the neighbourhood (spatial, socio-economic, economic and institutional)

The City of Genk

Genk is located in the province of Limburg in Flanders, Belgium. It is composed of 8 city parts including 30 districts and has 65,000 inhabitants of over 100 different nationalities. Genk suffers from a higher unemployment rate (10.4% of the population) than other cities of the province (6.5%) or the Flemish region (6.7%). This is mostly due to the closing of the mining industry 25 years ago. This cosmopolitan city is moreover experiencing difficulties in improving social cohesion among its residents. This is partly because the city has a high rate of population turnover and a high concentration of isolated people, especially seniors and single-parent families.

Eleven districts are particularly vulnerable: Kolderbos, Nieuw Sledderlo, Winterslag 2-4, Nieuw-Termien, Vlakveld, Waterschei-Noord, Nieuw-Texas, Nieuw-Driehoeven, Nieuwe Kempen, Zwartberg-Noord en Zuid. Those neighborhoods are characterized by several issues such as poverty, ageing, unqualified outflow, school dropout, precarious housing stock and low social security. Since 1995, the City of Genk has adopted a "neighborhood development approach" (wijkontwikkelingsaanpak) to help the most deprived areas. In 2001, the City Council decided that the neighborhood approach should be extended to the whole city in order to equally improve the social and the physical qualities of every neighborhood.

At the spatial level, Genk is marked by its mining heritage and is the third largest industrial city in Flanders. Former coal mining sites and buildings have been recently transformed into new projects: C-Mine (Winterslag), Thor Park (Waterschei) and Labiomista (Zwartberg). Those spaces are now dedicated to nature, culture, arts, sciences and technology and contribute to the attractiveness of the city, which is visited by 400,000 people every year.

At the institutional level, the neighbourhood development strategy has evolved significantly and has changed its name since 2019 to an "integrated area-oriented operation" (gebiedsgerichte werking). This new approach can be considered the empowerment action plan in Genk. In order to encourage citizens to play an active role in neighbourhood projects, the City of Genk has a "Neighbourhood Development Department". In each city part, one city officer called "**neighbourhood manager**" connects citizens and supports their initiatives. Those neighbourhood managers work in close collaboration with "**street workers**" and with "**community workers**" from provincial associations. Moreover, Genk is a small city and has had the same political party for a long time, which creates close relationships between politicians and inhabitants.

All those actions are part of the six-year Policy Plan 2020-2025, which was complemented by SWOT analyses realized at the neighborhoods level by an external consultant (GRTDCSTR bvba).

The district of Genk Centrum

Genk Centrum has no historical centre and is characterized by a low dynamic and a lack of identity. It is a multifunctional district with 200 shops and catering, one shopping centre, one library, two parks, the City Hall and the railway station. For this reason, the Centre of Genk was not considered a residential area and was initially not integrated into the neighbourhood development approach. However, this is one of the most populated city parts of Genk, welcoming more than 3,400 residents for an area of 87 hectares. Nevertheless, there are no typical neighbourhood infrastructures such as associations, community centres, meeting places nor a general neighbourhood committee. There is therefore a need to hire a new neighbourhood manager dedicated to Genk Centrum.

This grey and multicultural centre is mainly inhabited by seniors (40%), newcomers or other socio-economic vulnerable groups. Language barriers are significant and about 50% of pupils have a foreign mother tongue. The neighbourhood is moreover characterized by high rates of unemployment, isolated people and underprivileged households. Police interventions are frequent and many safety issues are reported (e.g., bike theft, burglary, loitering around the library and station areas, drug-related nuisance, etc.). The neighbourhood also suffers from environmental issues such as littering, noise pollution or lack of green spaces. In a car-dedicated city, the public spaces are not adapted to alternative mobility and the underground foot tunnel is still underused. Current and future urban planning projects thus include a general greening plan of the city centre and the redevelopment of the railway station area, the Europalaan shopping street and the Regina Mundi site.

3.1.3. Specific objectives

In order to transpose the neighbourhood management approach to Genk Centrum, specific objectives were defined. They can be grouped in three categories.

Promoting small-scale citizens' initiatives

- Defining, creating, following up and implementing relevant projects for the balanced development of all neighbourhoods;
- Supporting bottom-up initiatives, stimulating participation and co-creation;
- Expanding the role of the neighbourhood manager and the core team.

Redeveloping physical spaces

- Greening and maintenance to ensure high-quality public spaces;
- Integrating art and culture in small-scale projects;
- Stimulating temporary use of vacant spaces.

Improving social cohesion

- Making all the inhabitants feeling at home;
- Building a strong social network;
- Developing community projects to reactivate a grey centre.

3.2. Genk – Nomadland

3.2.1. Brief description of the project

The global objective of this pilot project is to **connect the Zwartberg neighbourhood and Labiomista in order to add value for the whole neighbourhood** in terms of public domain, involvement, image, employment opportunities, etc. Given the low commercial activity in the Zwartberg district and the (deliberate) absence of catering in Labiomista, Nomadland consists of four “**gipsy wagons**” used to offer food and drinks to visitors at an affordable price. The original idea came from the artist of Labiomista and was developed with a citizens' group as part of N-power. This project was however initiated before

N-power and has benefitted from a strong support from the City for several years. This background induces closer relationships between inhabitants who have known each other for a long time, and with the neighborhood managers and the community workers who have a good knowledge of the neighborhood. Nomadland was implemented in summer 2020, between the two lockdowns.

3.2.2. Context of the neighbourhood (spatial, socio-economic, economic and institutional)

The **Zwartberg district** is a former mining site located on the Northern side of Genk. This neighbourhood has suffered from commercial decline and there is nearly no shops. Nowadays, the neighbourhood has 1,750 inhabitants of which 20% have a foreign nationality.

More specifically, the N-power pilot project is taking place at **Nomadland**. This place was first abandoned after the closure of the mining industry, and then redeveloped as an open space during the SUN project. Since the early 2000s, Nomadland has hosted community-led projects, including shared gardens with thematic social activities. Therefore, this area has already been used and appropriated by some groups of citizens who have developed a sense of ownership. When the City decided to take over Nomadland for a new project, some tensions arose between those citizen groups and the City.

Nomadland is situated next to **Labiomista**, a biological and cultural centre. This innovative project is built on a former zoo and mining land and resulted from a collaboration between a Flemish artist and the City of Genk.

3.2.3. Specific objectives

Nomadland is an area used to reconnect Labiomista with the Zwartberg district and to propose value-added activities for nearby neighbourhoods. To achieve this goal, the artist's original idea was to install a greenhouse, but this idea evolved into a pavilion and then gipsy wagons for economic reasons. This pilot project has several specific objectives, making Nomadland a place of open-air experimentation.

Experimenting gipsy wagons

- Building wagons by the inhabitants themselves;
- Installing the wagons close to existing facilities (picnic area and tent);
- Offering catering in a neighborhood that lacks commercial activities;

Experimenting an OpUnDi (Open University of Diversity, Labiomista) approach

- Connecting diversity to science, policy, art and community;
- Using Nomadland as an open lab.

Using the project as a catalyst to develop employment

- Organizing small scale economic activities (by the Friends of Nomadland);
- Using Nomadland as a possible accommodation for entrepreneurs.

3.3. Liège – I am writing in the City

3.3.1. Brief description of the project

This pilot project follows a former participatory process carried out in Saint-Léonard and Droixhe in the framework of “Aux Livres Citoyens” (to books, citizens). This citizen consultation promoted citizen actions around books, reading and writing as vectors of emancipation. “I am writing in the city” also aims to empower and bring inhabitants together through reading and writing activities, but also through the **experimentation of cultural and artistic practices** in the broad sense. Moreover, one transversal objective is to **transfer experience** from a neighbourhood with a rich participatory background (Saint-Léonard) to a less mature neighbourhood (Droixhe). In practice, new **co-design and co-management processes** were first developed and tested in Saint-Léonard, and then transferred and adapted to Droixhe. In Saint Léonard, the project mainly focused on the development of a personalized signage

system to improve the accessibility of the neighbourhood while in Droixhe, various small initiatives were developed to improve the image of the neighbourhood.

3.3.2. Context of the neighbourhood (spatial, socio-economic, economic and institutional)

The pilot project is located in Liège, which is the biggest city in terms of inhabitants in Wallonia, Belgium. More specifically, this project is developed in two deprived neighbourhoods undergoing a process of urban regeneration, but having different backgrounds. It should also be noted that the Atlas Bridge connecting Saint-Léonard (left bank of the Meuse river) and Droixhe (right bank) is underused.

Saint-Léonard

Saint-Léonard neighbourhood is part of the administrative district of North Liège. This neighbourhood has 12,000 inhabitants who form a precarious but dynamic population with a high concentration of artists, a great social and cultural mix and a strong associative network. This working-class neighbourhood is marked by industrialization and has been the subject of an urban renewal operation since 1995.

In the recent years, several important public investments were made to support the redevelopment of the Saint-Léonard esplanade and the Vivegnis square. The SUN project also played an important role in the revitalisation of the district. In 2016, the municipal library moved next to the contemporary art centre “Résidences - Ateliers Vivegnis International” (RAVI) on the Vivegnis square. In the future, a potential project is the rehabilitation of the old station.

Droixhe

Droixhe is an administrative district of the Bressoux section in the Northern part of Liège. This dense neighbourhood has 2,500 inhabitants with 63 different nationalities. In comparison with other neighbourhoods in Liège, the population is also characterized by an over-representation of youth, foreigners from outside the European Union and non-working adults. The assets of the neighborhood lie in its cultural mix and its strong associative network. Nevertheless, the neighborhood committee disbanded years ago, making it difficult to mobilize citizens today.

Historically, the area was a large agricultural and then military plain which was later used to host the Liège International Exhibition in 1930. The actual urban fabric is mainly composed of modernist high-density social housing built in the 1960s. Since the end of the 1980s, the neighborhood suffers from ageing infrastructures, overcrowding, delinquency and recurrent incidents of crime. Today, the tarnished image of neighbourhood makes it unattractive and isolated. Therefore, a large-scale renovation operation is underway to change both the physical and the social morphology of the neighborhood.

In practice, there is no formal neighborhood regeneration program, but several punctual regeneration plans. In 2007, an urban requalification plan was introduced to reach social diversity by proposing a mix of functions and a mixed housing. However, this plan aroused the mistrust of the inhabitants because it was decided by the authorities without consulting them. In 2014, an intersectoral action plan has been established to tackle the feeling of insecurity and the low social cohesion. Future-coming projects are the new tram station and the relocation of the “Hall des Foires” (exhibition hall).

3.3.3. Specific objectives

The implementation of a **consultation process** in Saint-Léonard and Droixhe has three major objectives. The two first objectives correspond to a preliminary phase of the pilot project, which was conducted in both neighbourhoods. The third objective concerns the continuation of the project which is exclusively dedicated to Droixhe.

Enhancing the visibility, the accessibility, the image and the conviviality of the two neighbourhoods

In Saint-Léonard, this objective was pursued through the experimentation of citizens with photographic practice, the co-design of a signage system and the co-management of a public billboard. This initial objective was slightly adapted to the specific context of Droixhe, moving on from questions of accessible signage to questions of image and openness of the neighbourhood to the outside world.

Experimenting with cultural and artistic practices in both neighbourhoods

- Meeting and mobilizing the local inhabitants through artistic activities;
- Strengthening citizen participation using culture and art as means of expression;
- Co-creating artistic interventions with residents to beautify public spaces and to concretely act on their living environment;
- Disseminating the project in the public space to improve the neighbourhood's conviviality.

Further experimenting with cultural and artistic practices in Droixhe

- Developing language practices to give all inhabitants the same opportunity to express themselves about their neighbourhood;
- Capturing and transposing citizens' expression (reading, writing) into concrete realizations;
- Co-creating small semi-permanent installations in the public space.

3.4. Liege – Around the pond

3.4.1. Brief description of the project

This pilot project is also located in Droixhe and follows “I am writing in the city”. The previous citizen consultation indeed revealed that many problems are encountered in the public park of Droixhe called “Around the pond”. This park is in the centre of the neighbourhood and there is a pond in the middle, but it is underused. There is a low level of appropriation of this green space by the inhabitants, who have reported the deterioration of the facilities and have gradually stopped going there. They also feel that the City has abandoned the neighbourhood and especially this park, which is poorly maintained. The project consists of the **refurbishment of the park on the basis of a participatory process** with inhabitants. After several participatory workshops with citizens and associations, one redevelopment plan of the park was chosen and the work will be completed by the end of November 2021.

3.4.2. Context of the neighbourhood (spatial, socio-economic, economic and institutional)

See section 3.3.2. Droixhe.

3.4.3. Specific objectives

The main goal of this project is to **actively involve the inhabitants in the co-construction of the pond park** in order to reappropriate and change the neighbourhood, both physically and socially. This project is also expected to reduce insecurity and incivility in the park. More specifically, the detailed objectives can be grouped in two main categories.

Involving inhabitants in a neighbourhood project

- Mobilizing the local inhabitants;
- Creating a synergy between inhabitants (children-youth-elderly, Belgian-immigrants, men-women...);
- Raising public awareness;
- Valuing heterogeneity and respecting diversity and interculturality.

Co-constructing the pond park

- Recreating a strong symbol and a place of conviviality in the heart of a changing neighborhood;
- Valuing the existing resources of the park and its direct environment;
- Co-designing common projects with the inhabitants and for the inhabitants;

- Concretely implementing some projects co-constructed with citizens;
- Co-managing the projects over time.

3.4.4. Additional objective for both pilots in Liège

In addition to the objectives presented in Sections 3.3.3 and 3.4.3, the project managers also defined one transversal objective for “I am writing in the City” and “Around the pond”. Those two pilots both aim at **changing the City’s mindset about citizen participation**. This goal requires to:

- Raise awareness within the administration;
- Federate all local authorities around the pilot projects;
- Promote transversal exchanges within the administration;
- Mobilize staff within the Public Reading Service.

3.5. Seraing – Parks Marêts and Morchamps

3.5.1. Brief description of the project

For several years, Seraing has been the object of an important master plan to restructure and to revitalise the city from a spatial, social and economic point of view. Just like other parallel projects (UIA “A place to be-come” or Interreg “SeRaMCo”), the N-power project is considered a tool for the implementation of this urban strategy. More specifically, the pilot project aims at **rehabilitating two parks located within two targeted neighbourhoods: Marêts and Morchamps**. In the long run, this project has the ambition to upgrade two existing parks, to integrate them in a network of existing green spaces, **to ensure their sustainable maintenance and to strengthen their role in terms of social cohesion and reduction of inequalities between neighbourhoods**. In practice, a diagnosis revealed the encountered problems and a survey gave a first insight into the needs of the citizens. There were then translated into design plans for the parks. To go one step further, a call for projects was launched by the project manager in order to give citizens the opportunity to implement and co-manage small projects in the parks.

3.5.2. Context of the neighbourhood (spatial, socio-economic, economic and institutional)

The City of Seraing

Seraing is an industrial city of 65,000 inhabitants and is located in the province of Liège in Wallonia, Belgium. Since three decades, there has been a progressive decline of the steel industry, which resulted in many issues: job losses, a decrease in municipal revenues, a loss of purchasing power, a decline in trade, a deterioration of housing, etc.

In 1986, a municipal association called **AREBS** (Association for the Economic Redeployment of the Seresian Basin) was created to tackle those problems. Since the early 2000s and for a period of 30 to 40 years, an ambitious urban planning strategy has been initiated and developed by AREBS. The management and execution of the work are carried out by **Eriges** (“Ériger Seraing” = Build Seraing), an autonomous municipality-controlled company.

Three major plans are currently in force:

- Since 2005, a general **Master Plan** aims to rebuild an attractive, job-creating post-industrial city. This master plan is especially focusing on the 800-hectare Seresian valley;
- Since 2015, a **Master Park** focuses on the connection between green spaces and the provision of a quality public space close to each inhabitant;
- Since 2015, a **Social Master Plan** proposed to individually accompany the inhabitants in their life paths and to create links between them, the municipal services and the associations.

Seraing has a strong network of local associations that are active in various fields. There is moreover a high concentration of educational institutions (kindergartens, elementary, secondary and higher education schools) that welcome about 5,600 pupils and students, especially in the city centre.

Park Marêts and Park Morchamps

The “Parc des Marêts” (Park Marêts) is in the City centre, while the “Parc de Morchamps” (Park Morchamps) is in the South of the city (Molinay neighbourhood), on the other side of the train station. Both parks are located in densely built-up areas, making those public green spaces not very visible to the inhabitants.

The two neighbourhoods have 6,000 inhabitants who represent 10% of the total population of Seraing. In comparison to the rest of the city, those two neighbourhoods are young and multicultural. They are indeed characterized by a higher proportion of foreigners (26%) and a lower average age (36.5). There is also higher rates of school dropout, unemployment and people receiving a “social integration income”. Many problems of vandalism, illegal dumping and security are regularly reported. Other reprehensible acts are often committed and are generally attributed to youth: insults, drug sale, intimidation, physical assault, damage to public spaces, etc.

3.5.3. Specific objectives

The rehabilitation of Park Morchamps and Park Marêts pursues several objectives, which are the same in both neighbourhoods.

Engaging and empowering any citizen interested in improving the use of public spaces and parks

- Understanding the challenges to be addressed in the parks and establishing a diagnosis based on citizens’ expectations;
- Enriching park development projects through citizen participation and proposing solutions adapted to the issues at stake;
- Proposing activities and infrastructures **co-designed, co-constructed, co-managed and/or co-maintained** with residents and associations.

Ensuring the continuity of the participatory dynamic

- Improving the relationships between politicians, City administration and citizens in order to generate more trust, more pride and a better knowledge of their rights;
- Strengthening the capacity of the inhabitants and making them more and more autonomous;
- Creating an assembling structure for citizens;
- Becoming a laboratory in order to replicate the empowerment methodology in the other parks of the municipality (e.g., Jemeppe Park).

Enabling public servants to better interact with citizens in the management of the neighbourhoods

- Understanding the organization of the municipal administration and the social workers;
- Creating a new function of **park keeper** that will be the link between the City departments, and between the administration and the citizens;
- Clearly defining the missions of the future park keepers;
- Using associations as intermediates with citizens in order to overcome their distrust towards institutions and to benefit from their great involvement in the associative network.

3.6. Eupen – Park Loten

3.6.1. Brief description of the project

The main objective of this pilot project is **the collective redesign and refurbishment of Park Loten into a social meeting place**. This park is located in the heart of the Bergviertel neighbourhood, which is characterized by a lack of individual green spaces and a low social cohesion. In practice, the project manager first organized an “Idea market” to collect ideas from inhabitants to redevelop the park and to

give it an identity. Three participatory workshops with local inhabitants then took place in 2019 and were coordinated by the landscape architect responsible for the design of the new park. The work was completed in 2021 and the park is now equipped with a new playground, sports facilities, a green auditorium, a barbecue zone and a new path. Smaller projects were also co-constructed by citizens, the architect and the project manager (e.g., logo stickers, radio container). In addition, various events were organised in order to engage people in the dynamics (e.g., urban picnics, flea market).

3.6.2. Context of the neighbourhood (spatial, socio-economic, economic and institutional)

Eupen is part of the German-speaking community and located in Wallonia, Belgium. The **Bergviertel** district is one of the inner-city neighbourhoods of Eupen. This former working-class district has suffered from commercial decline since the 1970s. It is now a residential neighbourhood with many families and barely no economic activities.

Bergviertel has 1,700 inhabitants corresponding to 650 households. The population is young and multicultural: it includes one 30% of young adults (20-39 year-olds) and 45% of foreign inhabitants from 45 different nationalities. There is a great cultural and religious mix, which is an essential part of the neighbourhood image and a matter of pride. The social contact centre is very active in the neighbourhood. It is related to the local church and collaborates with the neighbourhood committee, which is also related to religious activities. Despite its strong religious community, Bergviertel is characterized by low social cohesion and neighbourhood identity. This is due to a high population turnover: Bergviertel tend to be a passage neighborhood for foreign people who then move to neighbor cities to get a job. Moreover, most inhabitants live individually with no access to a private garden.

To meet the need for green spaces, the City has planned since 2014 to refurbish the **Park Loten**, which is located in the center of the neighborhood. The park is a welcoming place with a small playground for families, a basketball court for sportspeople and a quiet garden for nature lovers. It is however not very visible and not well known by the inhabitants. The N-power pilot project is following the SUN project, which already developed collective gardens close to Park Loten. Various social, cultural, educational, ecological, economic and community institutions are also located within 500 meters of the park. During a citizen consultation conducted in 2018, inhabitants expressed the need for a place to gather and meet in order to increase the quality of life and the social cohesion in their neighbourhood.

There is no formal neighbourhood regeneration plan in Eupen, but there is a strong political will to promote citizen participation to improve the neighbourhood. The ambition of the City is to stabilize the N-power project manager as a neighbourhood manager, and to replicate the neighbourhood approach in other parts of the city.

3.6.3. Specific objectives

The main objective of this pilot project is to **engage and empower citizens willing to improve the use of public spaces of their neighborhood, especially the pilot area Park Loten**. Beyond the spatial renovation of the park, this project requires to recreate links between citizens and local actors, but also to change the mindset of both the inhabitants and the administration. Four categories of specific objectives can be defined.

Working in close collaboration with associations and other local actors in the neighbourhood

- Reaching “excluded” citizens;
- Actively involving them in the redesign of Park Loten;
- Generating neighbourhood cooperation;
- Creating a greater coherence among the citizens of Bergviertel.

Using Park Loten as a social meeting point and event venue

- Reconnecting the park and the neighbourhood;

- Strengthening the identity, the image and the social cohesion in the neighbourhood;
- Developing socio-cultural initiatives by inhabitants themselves.

Creating a behaviour change in the neighbourhood

- Encouraging citizens and local associations to change their stance and behaviour and to become more actively involved in the neighbourhood development projects;
- Expanding citizens' social skills and abilities: initiatives and infrastructures should be designed and realized under their own responsibility;
- Supporting participation of citizens in future fundraising projects.

Creating a behaviour change in the municipal administration

- Establishing an EMR network of partners interested in neighbourhood development policies and pursuing exchanges after the end of the project;
- Leading local administrative agents and persons responsible of related initiatives to participate to the N-power training program;
- Launching exchanging projects concerning knowledge transfer between N-power partners.

3.7. Verviers – Prés-Javais neighbourhood

3.7.1. Brief description of the project

This pilot is taken place in Prés-Javais, a neighbourhood that particularly suffered from the decline of the textile and economic industry in Verviers. In recent years, residents have felt abandoned by local authorities and some citizens' groups have mobilised to take action on their living environment, and especially the green spaces. In parallel, an urban renewal programme was developed by the city to restructure the urban areas. The goal of this pilot project, developed almost alone by the project manager, is **to encourage citizens to become active in the improvement of their neighbourhood, its conviviality and social cohesion** with little means. In practice, inhabitants were first mobilized by the project manager and the field social workers who had already developed a trust relationship with citizens and associations. Citizens actively participated to small co-constructed projects and events like a flea-market, a neighbourhood picnic, a collective mural painting. In the long run, those initiatives are expected to generate a real neighbourhood network and to reconnect all citizens.

3.7.2. Context of the neighbourhood (spatial, socio-economic, economic and institutional)

Prés-Javais is a neighbourhood located just outside the city centre of Verviers and is crossed by the Vesdre river. In the 14th century, this area had a strong industrial activity characterized by textile warehouses, and was inhabited by many working-class families. Following the decline of the industry, this once prosperous neighbourhood was gradually abandoned. Over the past 10 to 20 years, there has been further commercial decline leading to the disappearance of local shops and services and the increase of empty spaces. The area is also very car-oriented with few green spaces.

Prés-Javais has 1,600 inhabitants of which 50% do not have French as their native language. The population is characterised by its great cultural diversity but also its high relocation score. There are few contacts between neighbours and the young people recently expressed the need for a youth centre. The network of associations is very active, but they generally work in isolation.

In recent years, the inhabitants perceive their neighbourhood as abandoned by the local authorities who have made many promises. This lack of concrete action by the City motivated a group of residents to act on their neighbourhood. Through their bottom-up engagement, a playground has been built in Plaine Lentz. In 2018, this same green space was provided with new sports fields, which were co-financed by a famous local soccer player and the City of Verviers. Since June 2021, the neighbouring Marie-Louise Park hosts a street training structure.

There is no formal neighbourhood regeneration plan in Verviers but an urban renewal programme was introduced in 2018. More specifically, this plan includes an operation called “**Prés-Javais se tisse**” (Prés-Javais is woven) to restructure this urban area and improve the quality of life of inhabitants. This urban renewal program is led by the City of Verviers and facilitated by the design office AUPa. Through urban renewal meetings, citizens and associations are offered a platform to feel more active in their neighbourhood, and are provided with tools to identify their needs and take action. A municipal Consultative Commission for Urban Renewal (CCRU) was also created and brings together members of the municipal council and citizens selected by application.

The recent initiatives in the parks and the urban renewal program gave new hope and new expectations to citizens. The inhabitants who are active in a neighbourhood committee or local associations want support for their projects. There are currently three top-down projects supporting citizen participation in Verviers: the **N-power project**, a **participatory budget** and the “**factory of citizen links**” that aims to make every action or decision participatory (e.g., vote for budget allocation).

3.7.3. Specific objectives

In this pilot projects, three levels of objectives are defined, each of them targeting one type of actors: citizens, outsiders and workers from the City administration.

Creating a network of CITIZENS in the neighbourhood...

- Mobilizing and involving the residents in the project through the existing urban renewal project and the neighborhood committee;
- Working with neighborhood associations and external associations;
- Reaching all inhabitants, including vulnerable citizens, from all generation and cultures;
- Improving the social cohesion by reconnecting citizens and resolving disputes;
- Proposing a physical structure in order to develop long-term relationships between citizens.

...and showing them that they are capable

- Reactivating a grey center through community projects, concrete actions in the neighborhood and maintenance of the public spaces;
- Co-creating and co-managing all neighborhood initiatives and projects in close collaboration between citizens and municipal workers to keep a coherent overview and ensure sustainability;
- Integrating art and culture by temporary occupation of empty spaces and vacant stores.

Improving the reputation of the neighbourhood for OUTSIDERS

- Co-constructing projects to improve the appearance, the conviviality and the physical condition of the neighbourhood (beautiful, clean and attractive public spaces);
- Organizing diverse events, both inside and outside the neighbourhood;
- Providing unique and innovative services or activities (e.g. sports facilities) that will attract people living outside the neighbourhood: tourists, but also people living in Verviers or in the region.

Redefining the roles and activities of the CITY WORKERS

- Co-creating, developing and effectively implementing relevant activities with and for the inhabitants of the neighborhood;
- Openly supporting the N-power project, promoting the activities within the administration and driving political authorities to attend events and meetings;
- Defining the path for other similar projects by investing in thinking and in external expertise;
- Collaborating with other departments;
- Assembling participatory project leaders to exchange ideas.

3.8. Aachen – Aachen East and North

3.8.1. Brief description of the project

This pilot project stems from a willingness to create a connection between the citizens and the Economic Department of the City of Aachen. The City indeed observed that the digital economy is developing in Aachen but that many companies do not find qualified staff. The N-power project therefore aims at **reintroducing the inhabitants of Aachen North and East into the labour market by improving their competencies in the digital field**. The focus is rather on the citizens' digital needs and it is complementary to the "Soziale Stadt program" that rather tackle the need for physical infrastructures. The output of the project are therefore based on digital education and awareness, but do not provide spatial or material results. In practice, a co-constructed diagnostic was established with the citizens, the project manager and district managers resulting into 3 projects: digital holiday games to introduce the topic of digitalization to youth, a digital participatory platform allowing citizens to be actors in the developments of their district and a digital training program for inhabitants to become programmers.

3.8.2. Context of the neighbourhood (spatial, socio-economic, economic and institutional)

The City of Aachen has 259,000 inhabitants of which 29,000 are living in **Aachen North** (Nord) and in **Aachen East** (Ost). In the 19th century, big companies, such as car or railway companies, were active in Aachen North. Since the 1970s, the decline of the industry has led to an increase of the unemployment rate and a decrease of living conditions in Aachen North and East. Compared to the rest of the city, these two neighbourhoods have a high rate of unemployed citizens (28%) and foreign inhabitants (35,1% in Aachen North, 42% in Aachen East). This results in integration issues due to the language barrier. Both neighbourhoods benefit from the support of the federal programme called "**Soziale Stadt**" aiming at renewing distressed neighbourhoods.

In recent years, the City of Aachen has developed a masterplan that integrates innovative business and many transformation projects have been conducted. For instance, "The Depot" is an old tram depot that was transformed in 2017 into a library, a cultural centre and a youth centre. In the same way, "Digital Church" is an old church, which was transformed into a digital hub and the "Campus Jahrhunderthalle" is a former factory that is being transformed into an innovation incubator. In addition, a co-working space called "TZA" opened at the Europaplatz.

Today, Aachen is characterized by a highly technical corporate landscape, which is adapting to the digital transformation and is specifically interested in electric mobility and creative industries. However there is a lack of IT experts and many digital-based startups are looking for qualified employees in Aachen. This shortage of manpower and skills is exacerbated by the digitization of jobs and the digital divide. Indeed, some populations are unfamiliar with digital technology and do not meet those new job requirements.

In this "Smart City" context, the N-power project has the ambition to redevelop Aachen North as a space of innovation. Therefore, the project manager is from the Economic Department of the City and a partnership has been established with the RWTH Aachen University (Rhenish-Westphalian Technical University) to develop the digital training of the neighborhood citizens and especially potential workers.

3.8.3. Specific objectives

This pilot project envisions the **digitalization as an opportunity to redevelop the employment and to open up new options for civic participation** in Aachen North and South. The specific objectives are divided into three categories.

Integrating disadvantaged groups into the participatory process through digital means

This objective corresponds to the development of a digital tool for citizen participation in order to enable the population to co-design the ongoing processes in their neighbourhood. Through this digital platform, citizens, institutions and other actors have the opportunity to:

- Inform about the current projects in the neighbourhood (smart city initiatives, data and local economic landscape);
- Actively contribute to the development of their neighbourhood with ideas and smart solutions in order to improve, simplify and embellish life in their district;
- Orient future City developments (Digital Green Map);
- Decide by voting what should be done in their neighbourhood;
- Implement some of those ideas.

Promoting interdisciplinary skills and digital know-how to revitalize employment in digital fields

- Improving skills (writing, reading, learning, society...) of the most disadvantaged groups, so they can participate more in society;
- Facilitating access to digital education for a larger part of the population;
- Introducing citizens to digital changes;
- Creating Living Labs for digital training;
- Training socially disadvantaged citizens and local youth for new digital jobs such as programmers and employing them in local businesses;
- Presenting digital jobs in a playful manner to create vocations;
- Increasing the access of the residents to the labour market;
- Ensuring professional and social integration;
- Improving the economic attractiveness of the city.

Adapting to the needs of the target groups by developing innovative and sustainable activities in collaboration with local institutions, associations and citizens

- Establishing contacts with local actors, developing relationships and creating permanent structures;
- Developing mutual awareness and cooperation with local inhabitants;
- Promoting the N-power project;
- Defining a training program adapted to the target groups by considering the digital divide, the language issues, isolation challenges, etc.;
- Strengthening social integration and interaction in the neighbourhood.

3.9. Heerlen – micro-initiatives in Heerlen North

3.9.1. Brief description of the project

After the decline of the mining industry, empty places in Heerlen are now envisioned by the City as a potential for improving the quality and the vitality of the neighbourhood. Therefore, the Gebrookerbos method was developed as a broad and original neighbourhood development strategy based on citizen participation and applied to the Northern area of Heerlen. In this framework, the aim of this pilot project is **to stimulate the sense of belonging and the organizational capacity of the citizens, and to change their relationship with the local authorities**. The actors intervening in neighbourhood management include a “Brooker” and an “account manager” (see section 3.9.3), both partly paid by the N-power budget. Since 2014, 73 citizens’ initiatives have been facilitated by the “Brooker” and 33 have been implemented. Initiatives and related communities are encouraged to work together inter alia through the “Gebrookerbos Academy”, i.e. workshops and meetings gathering all involved citizens. In addition, research is conducted by Neimed and Open University to study the portability and effectiveness of Gebrookerbos as a possible generic method for other regions.

3.9.2. Context of the neighbourhood (spatial, socio-economic, economic and institutional)

The City of Heerlen

Heerlen is located in the province of Limburg, in the South of the Netherlands. It is one of the biggest cities in Limburg but has a rather low built density and a mostly rural landscape. The main economic activities are agriculture and tourism, but it also has an industrial heritage.

From the 1980s onwards, Heerlen experienced significant urban expansion, which then slowed down considerably. Since the beginning of the 2000s, the population has decreased from 95,000 to 87,000 inhabitants, and it is expected to decrease further in the future. This demographic shrinking is due to the closure of the coal mining industry, which left behind many abandoned areas and caused the departure of young people to the big cities.

The population is therefore characterized by an overrepresentation of older people compared to young people. There are also more people with disabilities, unhealthy lifestyles, or hazing behaviors than in other Dutch cities. Heerlen is moreover inhabited by many low-income groups and the unemployment rate is slightly higher than the average of the Netherlands. There are few foreign people, 70% of inhabitants being Dutch and 18% European.

In 2014, the “**Gebrookerbos method**” was created by the City of Heerlen, Neimed and Open University. It was then developed during 5 years as a potential generic method for several regions and was first tested in Heerlen. This programme follows a previous initiative called “pocket parks”, which were super small initiatives that served as trailblazer for larger initiatives. In the same way, Gebrookerbos relies on community-led micro-initiatives and encourages citizens to develop their own projects on empty places to improve their living environment. It is part of the municipality's restructuring program and demonstrates a strong political will to engage citizens in the development of the city and to link with all administrative departments. The motivation behind Gebrookerbos thus stems from a willingness to explore how the area can be restructured in a bottom-up way by making citizens shape and manage their own environment. Discovering if this model can work could help stop the vicious cycle of disinvestment by finding ways to give an impulse to the social and economic development of Heerlen. Since 2016, a research project about the method has started and since 2019, the City wrote a vision note about “Citizen involvement” mentioning the Gebrookerbos method as the guiding principle for citizen participation in Heerlen. Gebrookerbos is thus not only tolerated by the local (and provincial) government, but also accepted, recognized and even stimulated by the government.

The Hoensbroek district

Hoensbroek is part of Gebrookerbos region, which includes 11 districts in Heerlen North. Within the Gebrookerbos programme, all citizen initiatives have to stay within the perimeter delimited between Kasteel Hoensbroek and the Brussummerheide. The Hoensbroek district has 45,000 inhabitants and is characterized by greater social cohesion and involvement than the other neighbourhoods.

Hoensbroek is an old mining area which closure resulted in the decline of the demographic development and the creation of large empty spaces. They represent great opportunities to improve the quality and vitality of the area, especially for the surrounding neighbourhoods. The castle of Hoensbroek, Brussummerheide with the Pagan Nature Park, Geleenbeek valley and the related valley of Caumerbeek contribute to the patrimonial and landscape wealth. The sand quarries and the magnificent construction of the mining settlements also have a great potential. The region has a rich cultural background, historical identity and urban structure, which renovation is a priority for local authorities and which can be valorised by micro-initiatives.

In 2014, a citizens' group realised the “Schurenberger park” on old soccer fields in Maria-Gewanden, which is one of the four sub-areas of Hoensbroek. In 2019, a second park was created and completed in a year within the N-power project. The “Bongaard park” was previously occupied by social housing

and was designed in close collaboration with the City and “Het Woonpunt”, i.e., the social-housing corporation and land owner.

3.9.3. Specific objectives

This pilot project relies on two complementary objectives: the application of the Gebrookerbos method as an organisational macrostructure and the development of a physical microstructure of small citizens’ initiatives.

Transforming the neighbourhood through bottom-up micro-initiatives = microstructure

- Engaging the citizens of North Heerlen to take the responsibility of a vacant, open space and transform it into something new for the neighbourhood;
- Stimulating citizens’ ownership, bottom-up initiatives and organizational capacity;
- Ensuring co-production between local authorities and inhabitants;
- For each micro project, following three concepts:
 1. self-management of the initiatives: citizens assume the responsibility in the long run for the economic and physical development of their environment;
 2. being creative with rules: not everything is possible (e.g., zoning plans do not allow certain activities) but alternatives are sought together;
 3. daring to experiment: leaving room for citizens, who are helped only where necessary and when needed.

Implementing the “Gebrookerbos method” = macrostructure

- Changing the relationship between local authorities and inhabitants, moving from a hierarchical to a network society;
- Creating the role of “**Brooker**”, who is a social advisor on the field who encourages citizens to come up with their own ideas and supports their initiatives from the idea to the realization in terms of visibility, development, finances, collaboration... The Brooker has a neutral and independent position and links citizens’ initiatives with the local government, companies or social organizations. His or her role is also to share and transfer knowledge between the various parties, by organizing thematic workshops and meetings;
- Creating the role of **account managers** who are 6 municipal officers who each facilitates one citizen initiative in terms of municipal procedures, sets priorities and ensures that both private initiators and local government honour their commitment to each other;
- Contributing to Neimed research about the **Gebrookerbos method**. There are two main research objectives:
 1. To understand how Gebrookerbos contributes to the improvement of the socio-cultural and socio-economic situation of neighbourhoods in Heerlen-Noord;
 2. To explore the effects and determine the transferability of Gebrookerbos as a possible generic approach for bottom-up spatial planning in shrinking regions and cities.

4. Empowerment method implemented

4.1. Genk – City centre

4.1.1. Tools and methods implemented to reach the specific objectives

Technical means

The empowerment strategy in this pilot project consisted in supporting all ideas that come from citizens or to which they wish to contribute. Indeed, some ideas were initiated by the neighbourhood manager or the City and then appropriated by the citizens, while others directly originated from the citizens and were then facilitated by the neighbourhood manager.

Various small bottom-up initiatives were this way implemented:

- A co-managed **dog park**;
- A “**Geefmarket**” or “give market” where residents can exchange objects;
- The temporary use of an empty shop to create a social meeting place based on textile activities. The “**Textiel**” group is aimed to engage women in creative work and then back to employment. For instance, they produced boxes for table decoration and loaned them for parties;
- The co-creation of “**De Sfeertuin**”, a temporary green space installed on an area that would otherwise have remained empty for the next 5 to 10 years. The garden, the playground and the picnic bench were designed during four brainstorming workshops, and the planter bins can be decorated by the citizens;

Those projects all contribute to improve the social cohesion and the appropriation of empty spaces in Genk Centrum. In order to further enhance the physical quality of the neighbourhood, the City and the neighbourhood manager also organized many **greening initiatives**: planting seeds, community garden, flower pots, yoga space, “green the balconies”, etc. Some pop-up interventions were also tested in the inner courtyard of the City Hall in order to collect inhabitants’ opinion about this specific greening plan.

Financial means

The City has set up a **starter aid fund** of 1,500€ for launching new bottom-up initiatives. The Geefmarket and the Textiel group benefited from this one-time financial support, which is not intended to be renewed or maintained over time. In the long run, citizens and associations are supposed to manage their activities independently, without financial support from the City. In the case of the dog park, the infrastructures were directly financed by an inhabitant who has personal interest in the project.

The support of the City rather consists in the provision of material resources for the proposed initiatives. For instance, an **empty space** is rented by the City and made available free of charge to Textiel and the neighborhood bureau. In the same building, temporary storage rooms are provided for the Geefmarket. In the future, a multifunctional space will permanently house all those activities. In the same way, the City installed 9 planter bins in De Sfeertuin to help start the activity. In order to keep the budget down, the planters are **low-cost** with simple materials and basic design. Users of the garden can use these bins free of charge and install other facilities with the agreement of the City.

4.1.2. Communication and engagement strategies

The communication and engagement strategies are mainly based on direct meetings with inhabitants. The neighbourhood manager and the street workers used various information tools (flyers and contact forms) and mobilized citizens through door-to-door visits, workshops, events, etc. Four tools in particular were used repeatedly throughout the project in order to enhance the social cohesion and to build a neighbourhood network.

First, **home visits** were organized to meet newcomers and the most vulnerable inhabitants. Second, small groups of neighbours were brought together for “**Burenbabbels**”, which are informal and convivial

discussions between residents from the same block or street. Third, the community bar called “**Buurbar**” hosted several events to welcome new residents, keep in touch and get to know each other. Fourth, the digital platform called **Hoplir** is a social network for neighbors that promotes communication between citizens and citizen participation.

4.1.3. Involved actors, their roles and relationships

The City administration of Genk is one important actor in the N-power project. The Service of social affairs and the **Neighbourhood Development Department** are particularly involved. This department is headed by Dirk Habils and is composed of eight neighbourhood managers, one for each city part including the city centre. Their strategic and structural function is to collect the ideas and problems expressed by the inhabitants of each city part, and to report them to the **City council** and the **College of mayor and aldermen**. When a project is approved in one city part, the corresponding neighborhood manager is the link between the City and the citizens and makes sure that their needs are met.

The development of this integrated neighbourhood management approach led to the creation of a **Neighbourhood Team** in Genk Centrum that meets every two months. The **Core Team** is composed of four people:

- Annelies Hermans is the lead of the Neighbourhood Team, the N-power project manager and the neighbourhood manager for Genk Centrum;
- Femke Croux is the community worker for Genk Centrum and is the second contact person for citizens. She works half-time in the city centre, in close collaboration with the neighbourhood manager. Her role is to organize events, facilitate activities and mobilize inhabitants. There are eight community workers in Genk, one for each city part. They are external partners from Stebo and Rimo and are committed to a 6-year contract with the City as part of the integrated area-based operation;
- A delegate from the local service centre for older people;
- A delegate from Campus O³, which is a centralized place where families can go for all kinds of help, services, workshops and information about children and growing up.

In addition to these key stakeholders, other actors are part of the **Neighbourhood Team**:

- The Public Centre for Social Action;
- The housing company;
- The neighbourhood police officer;
- Street workers are paid by the city but do voluntary work, which is supervised by the neighbourhood manager;
- The coordinator from De Sfeer, which is an open house where vulnerable people can have a meal or a coffee and do some activities.

Apart from the Neighbourhood Team, additional actors from the City play a role in this pilot project. Other **City departments and services** (Housing Policy, Youth, Economic, Cultural, Green, Spatial) are solicited to provide advice, information, material or financial support for specific projects or problems within their fields of expertise. For instance, a working group called “greening city centre” was formed to facilitate the creation of “De Sfeertuin”, a neighbourhood park. This group is composed of the neighbourhood manager, the Greenery and Environmental Services and the Design Department, and works in collaboration with residents, the association De Sfeer and the Mater Dei primary school.

In an empowerment dynamic, those **local inhabitants and associations** are obviously key actors, but the target population varies from project to project. Given the diversity of the population in Genk Centrum, there is no ambition to create a central neighbourhood committee, but rather to develop small street or block committees.

When needed for some projects, **external partners** have been commissioned by the City:

- VLAM VZW (for pop-up greening of the City hall square);
- Designer Linde Hermans (for artistic guidance);

- Design office STRAMIEN (for the design of two greening plans).

Note that this collaboration with STRAMIEN was soon put on hold because of disappointing plans.

4.1.4. Challenges and adaptations

In Genk, as in all other cities, one of the biggest challenges is to **mobilise the inhabitants** for several reasons. First of all, Genk Centrum is characterized by few associations or clubs and a lack of meeting places, which results in the isolation of some residents, especially seniors. Elderly moreover do not want to get involved in their neighbourhood because they feel that they have already been engaged enough in the past and leave the space for younger people. Then, there is a high turnover of temporary inhabitants who are generally less invested, either because they have not yet established a network in their new city or because they lack the time to participate. Finally, the City sometimes encounters difficulties to identify unifying topics that interest the inhabitants. For instance, the initiative called “green the balconies” experimented in collaboration with the Green Service was not a success.

Given this mobilisation challenge, **the pilot project started with modest but crucial participatory activities** such as small chats and meetings with the residents to talk about their neighbourhood. Both for top-down and bottom-up initiatives, this pilot thus led to small-scale participatory projects that were not always clearly linked to the big-scale urban infrastructures. An additional challenge in Genk was therefore to inform the citizens about the N-power project and explain its contribution to the broad City strategy. In addition, even the smallest activities still require the approval of the other departments, which can slow down the implementation of citizens’ projects.

A further challenge is related to **the ephemeral nature of the empty spaces** used to support inhabitants’ bottom-up projects. Indeed, it is expensive to manage the occupation of temporary buildings, and to hire a facilitator mandated to organize calls for projects. This issue of sustainable maintenance also applies for ephemeral outdoor sites such as “De Sfeertuin”. The local residents are motivated to take care of the maintenance of this park, but they carry out punctual actions on a voluntary basis (e.g., pruning of fruit trees, cleaning of the park, planting flowers) and there is not yet a regular maintenance and structured supervision plan. Moreover, most of the gardeners only maintain the bin that they are using, but there is still little involvement in the communal parts of the garden.

4.1.5. Impacts on the neighbourhood

On the space

This pilot project in Genk Centrum **used the space as a means to connect the inhabitants** with each other. In particular, the temporary building provided by the City to host the neighbourhood bureau and the workshops by Textiel developed new connection between citizens in the city centre and brought the City administration closer to the inhabitants. The fact that this venue was used by several citizens’ initiatives made clear that shared use of space is a sustainable way to help developing a community in Genk Centrum. In the same way, space-based participatory methods such as block talks were conducted to meet, connect and reach out to citizens in the public space.

As previously mentioned, this pilot project moreover **exploited the potential of neglected spaces** in the neighbourhood to connect people with their immediate environment. For instance, an abandoned site in Nieuwe Kuilenweg was used as a temporary activity space for children during ten-week workshops. This is a good example of cooperation between citizens, NGO’s and the City administration. Other small interventions in previously empty spaces are more sustainable such as “De Sfeertuin”, which is planned to last several years.

On the City administration

The City of Genk has a long-standing tradition in neighborhood-oriented work that dates back to long before the N-power project. The City administration demonstrates a clear belief in citizens’ capacities and strengths by developing of a horizontal participation policy and supporting citizens’ initiatives. Through recent actions such as the starter aid fund, the N-power project is another concrete evidence

of this **political willingness to continue developing innovative participatory practices**. Indeed, the City has a long-term vision that requires day-to-day and city-wide efforts from many civil servants to sustain and evolve the model. New regulations were developed and approved in the context of N-power, allowing citizens to make parts of public domain greener under their own management. This shows a new relationship between the citizens and the City administration. Within the administration, there is also a growing conviction that horizontal communication is essential between the services of the same department.

After the end of N-power, **the neighbourhood approach initiated in Genk Centrum will continue**. The people in charge of the project will remain in place: the neighbourhood manager, the community worker and the Neighbourhood Team. Some initiatives tested during the project such as the house visits, the “Burenbabbels” and the “Buurtbar” will also probably be maintained as structural activities.

On the citizens

During this pilot project, many citizens were informed about the neighbourhood management approach in Genk Centrum and some have developed their own initiatives. This **awareness** was reached thanks to the thorough efforts of the neighbourhood manager and the community worker to reach residents one-on-one through block and street talks for instance.

Apart from this one-on-one first contact, this pilot project was not intended to focus on citizens on an individual basis, but rather to consider them as a community. The idea was to provide support to groups of residents who could potentially carry out initiatives for the general interest in the neighbourhood. Probably the most important impact on citizens is therefore **the ability they have developed to run their own bottom-up projects**. For instance, the “Textiel” project aimed to empower vulnerable people, especially women, at several levels. They developed new talents in sewing, practiced Dutch, left home to pursue activities and were guided by the employment department. Personal empowerment is therefore not a direct goal, but rather the indirect result of a **community empowerment strategy**.

An exception to this were the ten workshops for vulnerable children in Nieuwe Kuilenweg, a distressed neighbourhood in the North of the city centre. In this case, the main goal was to improve the individual skills of the children. The impact goes further than the children themselves since their parents also gained a better knowledge and understanding of the offer for children in the city centre, which heralds longer-term relationships in the future.

With regard to inhabitant's trust in the City, recent survey results show that citizens' trust in the administration and government was already high in Genk before the N-power project. This is due to the broad city policy, the proximity of the administration and the neighbourhood approach. However, the introduction of new neighbourhood manager and community worker in Genk Centrum certainly contributes to the continuation and the reinforcement of this trust relationship. The small-scale activities organized during the project moreover provided an opportunity to meet inhabitants in real life and show that **the neighbourhood team is approachable**.

4.2. Genk – Nomadland

4.2.1. Tools and methods implemented to reach the specific objectives

Technical means

In this pilot project, the main empowerment method is the construction and the management of four **gipsy wagons** with the citizens. During weekends and holidays, those wagons offer snacks and drinks to visitors of Labiomista and Nomadland in order to connect people and places. With the same objective to strengthen social cohesion in the neighbourhood, **festive events** called “Tomato fest” and “Appel fest” were the occasion for inhabitants to produce homemade food such as passata or apple juice, and then sell it to the visitors and among each other. Other community parties and regular annual activities also took place in the park during the project such as the Spring fest or the Halloween hike.

Financial means

This pilot project began before the N-power project and follows the **investment** made in Labiomista by both the artist and the City of Genk. Nomadland is owned by the City and is made available to citizens whose involvement in the construction of the wagons allowed to minimize the costs of the project. Moreover, the **maintenance** of the park is carried out free of charge by the Regenboog school, and the maintenance of the wagons is performed by the VZW “Friends of Nomadland” according to a 5-year formal engagement with the City of Genk. The Nomadland working group was indeed formalised as a **non-profit organisation**, mainly to buy equipment and clarify its engagement in the project. At the beginning, the group also borrowed some material from the neighbourhood garden and there is still a partnership to distribute the vegetables or make soups at the gipsy wagons.

4.2.2. Communication and engagement strategies

In order to reach and meet citizens, two strategies were used. First, **focus groups, workshops and community round tables** were organized to collect inhabitants’ needs and ideas to connect Labiomista to the neighbourhood. Then, physical links were also created through **hikes** between Labiomista and the old mine, **visits** of the Park Farm and paid **guided tours**.

4.2.3. Involved actors, their roles and relationships

In this pilot project, **the artist of Labiomista**, Koen Vanmechelen, plays an important role. He is the initiator of the project and worked in close collaboration with the City Administration, College and Council. In particular, the **Neighborhood Development Department** is active through the neighborhood manager of the Zwartberg district (first Fien Farrens and then Sien Willemans). In addition, the **Green Department** is in relation with the **technical service** for electrical connection, and coordinate the maintenance of the site, which is performed once a week by student groups from **School Regenboog**.

The school is also involved in the N-power project and included in the neighborhood network. There is a **neighborhood committee**, which is a group of 25 inhabitants focusing on the community needs and interests at a broader scale. This working group should not be confused with the **Nomadgroup** (ASBL Friends of Nomadland), which is a smaller group focusing specifically on the gipsy wagons. This group was originally a branch of the community center and is now an official non-profit organization chaired by Alex Laenen, including about 15 people working on a voluntary basis.

Three external actors also play a key role in this pilot project by connecting the different stakeholders together. Jens Vaes is the **community worker** from Stebo and works with the neighborhood manager to reach local inhabitants, shop owners and entrepreneurs. **Gigos** is an independent organization that more specifically works with vulnerable youth and Annick Gavrilakis is the **“liaison officer”**. Her exact role has still to be defined, but she is in charge of the application of the OpUnDi approach as a link between the City, Labiomista and the citizens.

4.2.4. Challenges and adaptations

During this pilot project, the City has been very supportive of the project, but this very positive aspect however brings some challenges. Indeed, the strong involvement of both Labiomista and the municipality **reduced the community decision capacity**. Those intermediaries can appear to be very influential, since the wagons’ idea came from the artist of Labiomista, who approached the community and provided support during the implementation. Moreover, the municipality backed citizens’ initiative and supported the realisation of the project on municipal land, but it happened **at the expense of including all communities**, especially the most vulnerable. Both the City and the artist of Labiomista should have perhaps made a step back to let the community organise itself and avoid conflicts.

In particular, some **tensions with the neighbourhood** arose due to the timing of the construction of the wagons (during the pandemic) and noise pollution from events and visitors. There were also some

conflicts with local shop owners who were invited to sell food in Nomadland, but refused and then complained about being excluded from the project. In fact, the biggest problem was the lack of feedback about the project and the lack of transparency about changes within the municipality. This **miscommunication** induced a loss of trust from some citizens, leading social workers to prioritise the appropriation of the project by the whole neighbourhood rather than focusing only on the “Friends of Nomadland”. One of the biggest challenges in this pilot was thus to find a balance between, on the one hand, citizens’ needs and goals, and on the other hand, the objectives set by the artist and the City.

4.2.5. Impacts on the neighbourhood

On the space

This pilot project has **transformed an underused area** in a very innovative concept called “Nomadland”. This project recreates links between different close areas in Genk: the Zwartberg district, the Nieuwe Kempen district and Labiomista. Nomadland is indeed a unique place where inhabitants can meet, take responsibility over their living environment and develop their dream projects. This exemplary pilot shows that it is possible to co-create a space with a consortium of diverse stakeholders: citizens of the neighbourhood, Labiomista, City administration and professional actors. The shared interest in this specific place allowed to consider everyone’s needs and aspirations through citizen participation, to develop close cooperation between all actors and to tailor the process to the neighbourhood physical, cultural and social specificities. Moreover, the fests organized in Nomadland create connections not only between the neighbours, but also between the neighbourhood and Labiomista.

On the City administration

This pilot project is innovative in terms of **co-management practice**. Nomadland is a land owned by the City and managed by a group of committed citizens, which shows a willingness to give inhabitants more responsibility and a release of control from the administration. This choice entails an accountability from both sides with regard to monitoring and embedding this new cooperative approach in the long term.

On the citizens

This project had a direct positive impact on the citizens who were involved in one way or another in the participatory process. In particular, the “Friends of Nomadland” learned how to **set up a non-profit organisation**, organise themselves and take responsibility for the maintenance of the site. Following some small conflicts with immediate neighbours due to nuisance, they have also learned to compromise and dialogue to manage and ease tensions before they get out of hand. Beside the “Friends of Nomadland”, the gipsy wagons moreover gave rise to other new community initiatives and events in and around Nomadland. On a larger scale, Nomadland has become an interesting spot for other neighbourhoods, or even other cities, as a good example of citizen commitment. This enthusiasm is shared by the citizens themselves who are proud to have been involved in this project and that Labiomista is part of their neighbourhood.

4.2.6. Additional transversal information for both pilot projects in Genk

Together, the two pilot projects in Genk have reached several hundred citizens from the city centre and Nieuwe Kempen. The involved groups are diverse in terms of age, ethnicity and social status. However, the inhabitants who have launched their own initiatives are always the least vulnerable.

4.3. Liege – I write in the City

4.3.1. Tools and methods implemented to reach the specific objectives

Technical means

In this pilot project, various methods and tools were tested to reach citizens’ empowerment in Saint-Léonard and Droixhe. The red thread is the organization and **facilitation of all activities by artists**, in particular the collective OST and the poet Karel Logist (see 4.3.3).

In Saint Léonard, **semi-structured interviews** were first conducted and **a map of the neighbourhood** was used to support the discussion with the citizens. Residents moreover expressed themselves through oral, written and photographic works during several activities such as **photographic walks** or “the parasol to speech” that collected inhabitants’ words.

In both neighbourhoods, participatory workshops then aimed to improve the physical state and the visibility of the neighbourhoods, which led to the **co-design a photographic signage system** in Saint-Léonard and the **co-creation urban artworks** in Droixhe. In Saint-Léonard, the signage in the libraries has been customized with inhabitants’ photos, and another signage system has been designed in the same way for the ASBL La Bobine in Droixhe-Bressoux. In Droixhe, the original intention was to reproduce the same type of local signage, but this objective was revised given the specificity of the area. Indeed, the challenge in Droixhe was not so much to improve the accessibility of the neighbourhood, but rather to embellish its image and open it up to the rest of the city. Therefore, a giant mural graffiti was co-designed and painted in the courtyard of the library with the collaboration of children attending the library on Wednesday afternoons. In addition, **writing workshops** have taken place twice a month at the Droixhe library and **reading classes** were organized for primary school pupils. Those activities provided an opportunity to consult children about the enhancement of their neighbourhood but they chose to mainly focus on the school courtyard and the openness of the school to the neighbourhood. The ideas formulated during the reading classes were finally implemented with the help of youth, who **co-constructed new low-cost furniture** for the schoolyard (e.g. benches).

Financial means

This pilot project in Liège does not mobilize direct financial resources, but is the result of a great human and material investment. Indeed, this project relies on the provision of the premises of “Résidences - Ateliers Vivegnis International” (RAVI) to the collective OST during their **3-months residency**. Their occupation of the RAVI building allowed to host many participatory activities and to create a temporary photo studio to design the signage for the libraries. In the same way, the libraries and the Droixhe primary school were essential partners to provide **venues for citizen participation**. Artists, associations, schools and libraries therefore played a key role by investing their time and energy in the organization of workshops and other activities. The City of Liège also invested some resources in the project and provided a **free public billboard** in Saint-Léonard. A **working committee** called “Signalothèque” and composed of librarians and library users was moreover created in order to manage this billboard and the signage system in Saint-Léonard. Signalothèque

4.3.2. Communication and engagement strategies

This pilot project is characterized by the use of artistic practices to reach a maximum number of people in the neighbourhood. In particular, citizens were recruited during other neighbourhood events such as the neighbourhood party of Droixhe or the “Parole aux Places” project in Saint-Léonard. The first engagement strategy is thus to **join existing initiatives** in order to reach out to the public more easily. A second engagement strategy is to spread the N-power initiative as widely as possible through **publications** and **videos**, which were produced by Instants Productions. Finally, a third strategy is to publicise participants’ artistic work through, for instance, an exhibition compiling photos and words collected in Saint-Léonard, or a show of the “Signalothèque” performed during the French Language Celebration event. Those **events value and share residents’ contribution** and could encourage more people to participate in the project.

4.3.3. Involved actors, their roles and relationships

Within the City administration, there is one **N-power project supervisor** from the Social Cohesion Plan (Grégor Stangherlin) and one **project manager** from the Department of Public Lecture (Stefan Paquet). In this pilot project focused on reading and writing, the libraries of Saint-Léonard and Droixhe are two key partners. **Librarians** are real facilitators between the City and the inhabitants, since the library is generally the first and sometimes the only cultural service of proximity frequented by citizens. In both

neighborhoods, targeted **participants** are newcomers, adults and youth, generally of foreign origin, disadvantaged and with a poor command of French. Some pupils are also participants and the primary school EFC Droixhe is a partner of the project.

The pilot moreover includes a strong artistic element, which was supported by two **collective of artists** called “Les Oiseaux Sans Têtes” (OST) and “Artisan Graphique”. OST has stayed for three months at RAVI in Saint-Léonard to organize creative activities with citizens, while “Artisan Graphique” realized a memorial piece that will be located in Vivegnis Square. This commemoration monument was an idea brought by the citizens’ collective “Collectif du Bâneux” (Cobâ ASBL). In Droixhe, the **poet** Karel Logist also organized writing workshops for inhabitants.

Many **associations** are involved in the project and their members participate to the different artistic activities. Those associations have various objectives such as integration, education or culture:

- “Revers”, which aims at integrating vulnerable people through cultural and collective actions;
- “CCE”, the Center for Educational Cooperation, which helps teenagers with school difficulties or have dropped out of school;
- “Compagnons bâtisseurs”, a youth organization that supports volunteerism and solidarity;
- “SSE”, the Social Service for Foreigners;
- “La Bobine”, a French as a Foreign Language (FFL) training structure;
- Saint-Léonard neighbourhood committee;
- “Espace Georges Truffaut”, the Cultural Committee of Droixhe Bressoux;
- “La fanfare du Nord” (the North parade);
- “La fanfare des enfants” (the children parade)...

4.3.4. Challenges and adaptations

One of the main challenges of this pilot project is the difficulty of developing a coherent initiative across the two neighbourhoods. Indeed, there is little emulation between Saint-Léonard and Droixhe.

On the one hand, the objectives for the two neighbourhoods were initially the same but had to be reframed in Droixhe to meet the local specificities. The changes adopted in Droixhe (e.g. co-creation of a mural graffiti rather than a photographic signage system; focus on the school courtyard rather than the whole neighbourhood) are not a drawback but an evidence of **adaptability**, which requires open-mindedness from the facilitators. However, this also results in a trial-and-error process that can seem less successful because some planned activities were not realized and few concrete outputs were achieved.

On the other hand, at the beginning of the N-Power project, the main participatory activities have remained localized in Saint-Léonard for a long time. This **slow start in Droixhe** is probably due to the novelty of participation in this area, whereas Saint-Léonard had a stronger participatory background as a result of the SUN project. Given the greater effort required to launch a citizen dynamic in Droixhe, “I write in the city” was to some degree considered **a prelude to “Around the pond”**. For instance, the writing workshops mainly introduced and promoted the N-power project in general, making the link with the following pilot. However, the interaction between both pilots in Liège remains low.

In addition, such participatory projects depend on a human component that can generate other unforeseen problems. In Saint-Léonard for instance, the “Signalothèque” group formed to manage the project disbanded and the billboard is thus self-managed and probably less used than it could be given the absence of people in charge. In Droixhe, **some conflicts arose** between the students from Droixhe school and the CCE ASBL, which was mandated to organize some participatory workshops. The breach of trust between the actors has led librarians and teachers to conduct the reading classes themselves.

4.3.5. Impacts on the neighbourhood

On the space

This pilot project adopts a place-based strategy and therefore mainly impacts the spatial qualities of the neighbourhoods. Initiatives such as the frescoes in Droixhe, the billboard in Saint-Leonard and the signs in the libraries all contribute to the improvement and the embellishment of the living environment. The artistic approach developed in both neighbourhood indeed increases their **aesthetic image**, but also their **visibility** for both local residents and visitors. The City also recognizes the positive impact of the project on the space and there is a willingness to transfer the signage system to the library network at the city scale. In addition, school pupils are proud of their “new” playground, which is now better used with less violence and a clearer distribution of space between boys and girls.

On the citizens

The impacts at the citizen and community levels are less tangible and less developed in this pilot project. The major impacts on citizens are positive side effects stemming from the spatial reconfiguration and the organization of a participatory process.

From an individual citizen perspective, each participant gained a better knowledge of his or her local neighbourhood. Participants also learned about **artistic practices** such as photography in Saint-Léonard, urban arts in Droixhe and writing in both neighbourhood. According to the participants themselves, the main impact of the N-power project is rather the feeling of being heard and considered through the citizen consultation. They are thus proud of their efforts to change the neighbourhood and they progressively develop a sense of belonging to the neighbourhood, as well as a feeling of worthiness. The absence of damage to the new facilities is also evidence of the success of the initiative, as the participants have adopted the signage and school furniture they helped to create. This appropriation is a sign of the citizens' willingness to take responsibility for the project.

From a community perspective, the project also changed positively the image of both neighbourhoods and initiated a collaborative dynamic between the residents. They collectively learned to know each other, to work together to **build a common project** and even to manage it (e.g. the playground in Droixhe school). Participants discovered the interests and personalities of their neighbours and slowly begin to form a community with shared goals and concerns. This “community” did not exist at all in Droixhe before N-power, while groups of active citizens have already existed in Saint-Léonard, especially since the SUN project. This difference is reflected in the number of participants involved in both neighbourhoods: over 500 people in Saint-Léonard and nearly 100 in Droixhe. In both cases, the participation rate is beyond expectations. However, the **growing community** in Droixhe remains limited to specific profiles of citizens, in particular school children and library users.

In the school and library contexts, further participatory processes will continue to be organised in the future. In particular, the negative experience with the CCE ASBL induced a better involvement of the school team and the students who have taken ownership of the project and **continue to make it live independently**, without the help of a facilitator from the associative network. This autonomy was also reached with the group of inhabitants that were consulted for the Italian immigration memorial and now manage this initiative on their own.

4.4. Liege – Around the pond

4.4.1. Tools and methods implemented to reach the specific objectives

Technical means

In Droixhe, several activities were organized in order to involve the inhabitants in the co-design and the co-construction of the pond park.

The first step was to inform citizens about this pilot project, which was done through one **public information meeting**, additional **meetings with shopkeepers** in the neighbourhood, one **presentation**

during the annual multicultural festival of Droixhe and the organization of a festive and **unifying event** with the neighbourhood associations. All these events were opportunities to meet the local residents and to explain and publicise the N-power project. In addition to providing information to residents, other activities aimed to gather their opinions on the park and the neighbourhood during **exploratory walks** and **micro-trottoir interviews**. This general public survey was completed with information collected at the meetings and **event stands**.

Then, a series of three **participatory workshops** was organised in 2020 with the help of the 11h22 collective (see section 4.4.3) :

- The first workshop was a kick-off meeting with the associations and the citizens. Part of this meeting was held on site in order to identify the black spots and the possible development areas. In other words, citizens expressed what they wanted to see appear or disappear in the pond park.
- The second workshop is based on previous results and in particular on five topics that emerged from both the first workshop and the survey. Citizens were consulted about their feelings, ideas and wishes for the future park around the pond. Those inputs were then analysed by the technical services of the City with regard to budgetary requirements, compliance with the sector plan, etc. A set of specifications (“cahier des charges”) for the works to be carried out in the pond park and three possible master plans meeting the budgetary requirements were proposed by the architect of the Public Space Management department.
- Due to the Covid-19 restrictions, the third collective workshop was replaced by individual meetings facilitated by the local development agent. The three scenarios were presented to the residents and they could choose what they preferred on the basis of a **scale model of the park**.

Finally, the refurbishment works were conducted by the City in summer 2021.

Financial means

During this pilot project, the City of Liège has launched a **public contract** to hire the external facilitators (11h22) who organized the consultation process. The financial resources were therefore made available by the city for the benefit of the citizens, but were not passed on directly to them.

In an effort to go beyond consultation and to induce a dynamic of citizen self-organisation, a recent project is the co-creation of a “**conviviality space**” in an underused multipurpose room located under the old church in the park. This conviviality space meets the citizens’ desire to have a sheltered meeting place in the park. To support this project, the original plan was to find alternative sources of funding such as crowdfunding, volunteering or sponsorship. However, the City would first like to take the time to gain more trust from the citizens and to inaugurate the place before asking them to invest in it, according to their means. Indeed, for the majority, this is a precarious public who do not necessarily have money to invest, but who can be a human resource to develop and manage the space. Therefore, the cultural centre was allocated an **exceptional grant** to activate the park and the conviviality space and a **crowdfunding campaign** should then be launched in 2022 or 2023. In addition, the activities developed will hopefully also generate small profits for the benefit of the conviviality space.

4.4.2. Communication and engagement strategies

As for the other pilot in Liege, the communication campaign used both physical posters and publications on the City’s website and Facebook. The results of the pilot project were also reported using photos and video clips produced by Instants Production.

The engagement strategy was more chaotic due to the multiplicity of interlocutors (the project manager, the local development agent, local associations, 11h22). In fact, some citizens explained that they filled in an **expression of interest form** to take part to the consultation process but were not contacted as planned by the city to communicate the date and time of the workshops. Fortunately, the associations were able to keep their beneficiaries informed and the local development agent made sure to **phone** all interested people when the problem was detected.

4.4.3. Involved actors, their roles and relationships

Within the City administration, there is one **N-power project supervisor** from the Social Cohesion Plan (Grégor Stangherlin), one **project manager** from the Department of Public Space Management (Isabelle André) and one field social worker called “**local development agent**” within the Department of Social Services and Proximity (Anne Rahier). In the context of this pilot project, it was this agent who first mobilized the citizens through individual and collective meetings. An external operator called **11h22** was then mandated to lead the participatory process, due to difficulties encountered by the project manager (lack of skills and capacities in this matter). The results of the participatory workshops have been translated by the **Public Space Management Department** into design plans for the redevelopment of the pond park.

The actors of the neighbourhood include the local socio-cultural network, which is coordinated by the **Collective Around the Pond**. This collective is composed of most of the non-profit organizations working in Bressoux-Droixhe but not directly of citizens, even if the members and beneficiaries of the associations may be inhabitants of the neighbourhood. The target audiences are inhabitants in general, but also newcomers, young people, pupils and their parents from the school in front of the park, the residents of nursing homes, people with reduced mobility, precarious people who do not generally participate in this type of debate, foreigners who do not speak French, etc.

4.4.4. Challenges and adaptations

As previously mentioned, this pilot project suffered from **miscommunication** with the potential participants. This difficulty to establish and maintain contact with local inhabitants is also linked to the lack of field officers from the City at the beginning of the project. Indeed, the City soon realized the importance **to be on site** to meet citizens and explain the N-power project with appropriate communication materials. Some citizens also expressed regret about the proposed timing for the citizen consultation. Indeed, all the activities took place during working days, which is only suitable for people who are beneficiaries of an association, job seekers or self-employed.

Another challenge is **the growing awareness of participatory processes**. At the beginning, the City of Liège had great ambitions in terms of empowerment and wanted to develop a project of co-construction and co-management of the park. The aim was to get residents to formulate proposals for improving the park, which they would then implement themselves in partnership with the municipal administration or local organisations. In practice, it was a relatively classic citizen consultation leading to a global plan of the park, rather than an active involvement of the inhabitants leading to small co-produced solutions. This revision of expectations is linked to the **mindset** of the two main stakeholders: on the one hand, the City's reluctance to let citizens decide and act on their own is still too strong, and on the other hand, the citizens lack trust in local authorities and generally position themselves as consumers rather than producers of their neighbourhood. A consultation where citizens are really heard and listened to was therefore the first logical step in a **participatory turnaround** in Droixhe.

4.4.5. Impacts on the neighbourhood

On the space

The park is in a very poor condition and will still need significant investment to make it truly enjoyable, but the improvements made as part of the N-power project are the start of a longer term process. The **symbol of the park, the jet in the middle of the pond, has been restored**, which was very important to the local residents. Other demands raised in the workshops were heard. In particular, **better safety** in the park is ensured through some pruning and new low planting, as well as an increase in meeting places (a picnic area, a long bench and the future conviviality space). The **aesthetic aspect** of the park has moreover been improved thanks to the flowering plants, the trees, the new benches and the colourful picnic tables. These park developments are part of a wider framework of renovation of the neighbourhood. The activities organised by the associations and the inhabitants of the neighbourhood in the conviviality space and in the park will also contribute to reach out to a wider public.

On the citizens

The first major impact of this pilot project on the citizens who participated is that their opinions and comments were heard and taken into account in the final plan of the park. Through this consultation process, they **realized that they could really play a role in improving their neighbourhood**. However, when they were waiting for the work to be completed, they still wondered whether the results would meet their expectations and, above all, whether this participatory process was just an isolated case with no follow-up or the beginning of a more global approach to try new things at the neighbourhood level.

On an individual level, the participatory workshops were **a good opportunity for citizens to learn to listen to their neighbours** of all ages (children, youth, elderly) and all origins, exchange their views and express themselves without fear of being judged. In particular, engaging in the neighbourhood helped some vulnerable population to escape from their daily problems. Moreover, participants gained **new knowledge about technical constraints** and an understanding of what can be achieved with a given amount of money. The transparency regarding the budget requirements is seen as very positive and this transparent communication should be further developed in terms of information about the project, current and future steps.

On a collective level, the N-power project enhanced the inhabitants' **sense of belonging to the neighbourhood** thanks to a come back to the original park, which was generating a feeling of nostalgia. The physical improvement and embellishment of the pond park is therefore a vehicle for bringing people together, even if the project has not reached this point. The next step is the creation of a "conviviality space", whose presence in the park will make it possible to multiply the activities and events that take place there and thus gradually improve social cohesion, and even to attract an external audience in Droixhe.

In addition, this project has probably helped to enhance citizens' trust in local government, as they have seen that it is possible to have productive exchanges with the administration and that the administration is willing to dialogue.

4.4.6. Additional transversal information for both pilot projects in Liège

Technical means and engagement strategies

Through the two pilot projects in Liège, a common objective was to change the administration's practices with regard to citizen participation and the internal functioning in silos. To do so, several **internal meetings** were organized with the City departments and a municipal **steering committee** was formed for the N-power project. This steering committee participated actively in the N-power events and learned a lot from the practices deployed in the other pilot cities. In addition, a **collective intelligence** exercise with the various City departments highlighted the levers and brakes towards the co-construction and co-management of the pond park.

Involved actors, their roles and relationships

The three main actors from the City of Liège involved in N-Power are:

- Grégor Stangherlin, the **N-power project supervisor**, from the Social Cohesion Plan;
- Isabelle André, the **pilot-2 project manager**, from the Department of Public Space Management;
- Stefan Paquet, the **pilot-1 project manager**, from the Department of Public Lecture.

Other people from the **municipal college** were also involved in the project to a lesser extent: the mayor (Willy Demeyer), the Aldermanity for culture, tourism and interculturality (Jean-Pierre Hupkens) and the Aldermanity for solidarity, social cohesion and human rights (Julie Fernandez). The **environment service** and the **department of works** were also solicited for the implementation of the works in the park.

In addition, the Department of Social Services and Proximity was particularly active in the person of Anne Rahier, the **local development officer**. Together with the **street educators** from the same department, her role was to identify inhabitants' and local organizations' needs in order to improve the social cohesion and the "living together" in the neighbourhood.

Finally, a strong link has been built with the **libraries**, which are now better recognised as key operators in the neighbourhoods.

Challenges and adaptations

Although much progress has been made, the City administration remains **reluctant to move beyond consultation** and, to some extent, the N-power project seems to have rather legitimated public policy than empowered citizens. However, there is a growing awareness within the administration that participatory processes require specific expertise that the City doesn't hold, which led to calls for external, and thus more neutral, operators to help for the consultation phases.

Impacts on the City administration

One of the major innovation brought by the N-power project was to have **the technical services and the social services work together** with the same objective on a single project. Thanks to this project, agents of various departments collaborate more easily with each other.

The City services working in the park (planting, cleaning) have participated in the project with good will. However, they are now waiting to see whether the improvements made will be respected and the facilities will not be destroyed in order to remain motivated and continue to mobilise.

4.5. Seraing – Parks Marêts and Morchamps

4.5.1. Tools and methods implemented to reach the specific objectives

Technical means

In order to improve the use of the Parks Marêts and Morchamps, the first step was to conduct a **SWOT analysis** (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) of both parks. This initial diagnosis was completed with citizens' needs and requests, which were collected during **consultation workshops**. Based both on the SWOT analysis and the opinion of participants, **development plans** for the two parks were drawn up with the support of the ASBL Adalia, an expert in vegetation and maintenance of green spaces. Those plans were then discussed with the citizens before work began.

In addition to the major development work conducted by the City in both parks, smaller **co-design and co-maintenance activities** were organized with citizens. In Park Marêts, youth from the school Lucie Dejardin and Liège Parkour school co-designed a covering for the new parkour park. In Morchamps, trash bins and barbecue were co-constructed in the park with inhabitants, and a "Guess-who?" game was co-designed with citizens from the associations in order to serve as a tool improving social cohesion and the identification of skills in the neighbourhood. Moreover, the youth centre located in the park was co-renovated: major work was conducted by professional city employees, and small repairs were carried out by the young people from the CJPS (Seraing Park Youth Centre). In the long term, the young people are also responsible for the maintenance and cleanliness of the premises.

In order to further empower inhabitants, AREBS launched a **call for citizens and associations' projects**. Inhabitants could propose a project, defend it in front of a jury and carry it out by themselves with a small amount of money that they will receive. An external consultant (Habitat & Participation, see section 4.5.3) was mandated to coach citizens to develop their ideas and organize some **creative workshops** with an edutainment focus, but they were soon abandoned for various reasons (see section 4.5.4). Therefore, AREBS conducted other co-design activities such as round tables, video coffee breaks, collective imagination sessions or theatre workshops. After identifying those interested in pursuing the initiative and submitting a project to the call, further **meetings** were held to clarify everyone's wishes and to put the feasibility of requests and ideas into perspective. An example of initiative resulting from the call for projects is the creation of a solidarity vegetable garden that will be co-maintained by two associations (Vivre Solidaire and CESAHM) with the support of Natagora. The produced vegetables will be used either for the food collections of Vivre Solidaire or to supply the canteen of the Saint-Martin school, which will organize nature workshops in the future.

Another technique that was experimented during N-power is the use of **nudges** to find solutions to illegal dumping, a habit that is all too common on the territory and that was pointed out by a citizen. Experiments with nudges have continued within the UIA project “A place to be-come”. This UIA project and the Master Park are thus seen as opportunities to continue the empowerment objectives even after the end of the N-power project.

Financial means

The City invested not only in the redevelopment work of the parks (e.g. a new agora, repair of the pétanque and soccer fields, parkour park, playground equipment, restauration of barbecues and picnic areas) but also in the participatory processes to encourage citizens to develop their own projects. Those monetary and human investments in the parks show the City’s willingness to improve the neighbourhood and to better include citizens in this dynamic. In response to these efforts, the City expected citizens to become more committed to the life of their neighbourhood and even to propose their own projects. Even if most of the projects were finally carried out by local associations, some citizens financed some small projects themselves.

4.5.2. Communication and engagement strategies

The N-power project has been widely publicised to local people. On the one hand, a **container** was used as a temporary space to host the communication campaign about the opportunities offered by N-power and the neighbourhood committees, as well as the citizen consultation workshops. On the other hand, information was diffused during various **events** organized in the public spaces or in the parks: soccer contest, neighbourhood party, “Parc en fête” (park in celebration)... Those venues were also an opportunity to make citizens meet and hopefully increase social cohesion.

Moreover, the inhabitants were mainly mobilised via the many neighbourhood associations. Indeed, Seraing is characterized by its rich associative network, which are often the privileged point of contact for citizens who still have limited trust in the City. However, these forces are not always well coordinated, especially in Morchamps. Therefore, **regular meetings with all associations** (14 in Marêts and 9 in Morchamps) were held by social workers every three months, as it is already the case in other Seresian neighbourhoods.

Furthermore, a loyalty agreement was established with the associations in the framework of the co-construction workshops. A second agreement was reached with the neighbourhood board to teach the youth to help maintain the public spaces. These **agreements** are an effective way to ensure a long-term commitment from residents, associations and the City, and to progressively build a new relationship of trust between stakeholders.

4.5.3. Involved actors, their roles and relationships

For this pilot project, a **N-power project management team** of two-people was formed.

The first project manager mandate was assumed by the municipal association for the economic redeployment of the Seresian basin (AREBS) in the person of first Amélie Joveneau and then Cyrielle Böttcher. In Seraing, **AREBS** is a key actor between the City administration and the inhabitants. It is directed by Florence Detalle and is involved in several regeneration projects including N-power.

The second N-power project manager operates within the municipal administration: after one year in charge, Christopher Sortino was replaced by Sophie Ohmer, who is also the project manager for the Master Park. Other people from the **municipal administration and the municipal college** were also involved in the project to a lesser extent: the general director of the administration (Bruno Adam), the Technical Bureau (directed by Albert Guissard), the Prevention Service (directed by Antonio Luca) were also part of the project; the mayor (Francis Bekaert), the aldermen for citizen participation (Alain Onkelinx and Julie Geldof) , the alderman for works (Laura Crapanzano) and the alderman for urban planning (Déborah Gérardon). Those city officers and elected representatives intervened at different times depending on the areas involved in the proposed projects.

In particular, **social workers** played a key role in reaching out to citizens, be they from the Social Cohesion Plan (PCS), the Strategic Plan for Security and Prevention (PSSP) or the CPAS. Together with the **peace officers** and the **street educators** from the Prevention Unit in Morchamps, they represent about 40 people that interact on a regular basis with the inhabitants. Other intermediate actors like **local associations** and the **neighbourhood board** also proved essential in mobilizing citizens.

In addition to the difficulty of reaching the inhabitants, the City of Seraing quickly realised the complexity of implementing an empowerment strategy. Therefore, they hired an external expert to conduct the consultation process, the **ASBL Habitat & Participation**, and collaborated with students from the **Faculty of Psychology**, University of Liège, to conduct the nudge experimentations.

4.5.4. Challenges and adaptations

Many initial ideas that were inspired by experiences elsewhere were aborted when they faced the reality on the ground and the contextual specificities of Marêts and Morchamps neighbourhoods:

- Two new neighbourhood committees were to be formed because there was none in Morchamps nor Marêts. However, the **relevance of such neighbourhood committees** has been questioned by citizens themselves considering the high density of associations already providing services and activities in their neighbourhoods. Residents indeed prefer to integrate active associations and remain in contact with well-known local faces rather than to join a new group.
- The street educators operating in the Prevention Unit were first supposed to **facilitate citizen engagement** but due to tensions, the project manager had to assume this role with the precious support of existing associations. Similarly, Habitat & Participation did not work on the project for long due to the Covid-19 restrictions, but especially due to the inadequacy of the participatory techniques used in the Seresian context. AREBS thus ensured the entire call for projects (associations and citizens' initiatives).
- The intention to create a new function of "**park keeper**" within the municipality was abandoned because it was considered expensive and inappropriate to meet local challenges. It was decided that the Prevention Unit and local associations would ensure a greater presence in the parks through their weekly activities to increase social control. A public contract for a "social work" training programme will be launched in order to make these local actors better able to fulfil this mission.

These adaptations are not only linked to the administrative constraints of the City, but also to the sometimes tense relations between the citizens and the City officials. Indeed, there is **a serious lack of citizens' trust in the City** because previous citizen consultations have not led to the concrete realisation of the proposed ideas. Most citizens see N-power as just a way of using European money and they do not feel that the City does take them into consideration any more than before. In their eyes, the administration is moreover associated with the police and they have more confidence in local associations. In this specific context, some usual mobilization methods (e.g. door to door) are not well perceived by citizens and cannot be used.

It is even more difficult to build a relationship of trust with the inhabitants in a **changing political and administrative context**. Although the political party has remained the same, the mayor and the municipal college have changed following the 2018 elections. In addition, the N-power management team changed in the middle of the project, during the phase of mobilization. Associations and citizens needed some time to reconnect with the new project managers, who themselves found it difficult to trace the work already done by their predecessors in terms of methodology and results.

Finally, this pilot project came up against the difficulty of including citizens in the design of an urban project. For instance, the design of the trash bins and barbecues proposed with citizens was not up to standards and had to be reviewed by the project manager. Projects co-designed with citizens therefore obviously need technical expertise that they do not hold. In the case of the calls for projects, citizens did not always feel up to the challenge and a **disengagement** was observed when the responsibility increased. Out of the 7 projects accepted by the jury, 4 were submitted by associations and 3 by citizens.

Those three citizen projects were finally abandoned along the way due to a lack of desire, a fear of reprisals or a lack of follow-up from the local authorities.

4.5.5. Impacts on the neighbourhood

On the space

In general, the residents' perception of the neighbourhood has not changed, but the parks are more appreciated. Their new design has made them much **more user-friendly and safer spaces**. Both parks are more welcoming and better lit in the evening, and there has been less open drug dealing in recent months. However, following the Covid-19 health crisis and the floods in July 2021, the inhabitants have not yet fully taken possession of these new spaces. The **general public's perception of the place is slowly evolving**, although some people are already pointing out some exciting changes: more presence in the parks, a more diverse audience, more children, fewer drug addicts, more flowers... Although the summer was not mild, many families and groups of friends used the barbecues and small children enjoyed the play areas.

On the City administration

The call for projects was unfortunately **not conducive to building mutual trust** between the City and the inhabitants. On the one hand, the management of the call was left entirely to AREBS and the City administration was not in contact with the citizens involved. On the other hand, all the projects carried out by citizens only were cancelled by their bearers. Conversely, the projects carried out by the associations were very successful, which reinforced the confidence of the City and the citizens in the project management capacity of these ASBLs.

Due to this success at the association level, **N-power is setting a precedent** and the City is considering developing new tools to support small-scale bottom-up projects. Large-scale urban development projects are still the exclusive domain of public officials, in a strategic and non-participatory logic. In the future, the City plans to make a participatory budget available to citizens and associations, and to perpetuate a dynamic of empowerment through the UIA project, which will hopefully open up more of the administration to new modes of governance and integration of citizens.

On the citizens

On an individual level, this pilot project has enabled citizens to acquire **a variety of knowledge and skills**. The call for projects gave the applicant associations a better understanding of how the City works, which they passed on to their members. By developing their own initiatives, the participants have also developed greater autonomy, but also a greater ability to work in teams and to communicate with each other. Thanks to Natagora's involvement in the management of the collective vegetable garden project, the participants learned a lot about growing vegetables, the life cycle, pollination, etc. Some people even documented themselves and then became resource persons for the rest of the group.

On a collective level, the bottom-up projects brought together the public of four associations. At least 200 people were involved, all with low financial incomes or registered with the CPAS, generally between 20 and 65 years old. The N-power project thus made it possible to **involve certain people that are not usually participating**, but regular beneficiaries of associations (newcomers, women, young people, precarious people, etc.). Some of them even took on a form of leadership in their group and took on the role of "ambassador", ensuring that the project was well managed and going door-to-door to inform their neighbours. However, the neighbours they invited did not necessarily participate in turn, appreciating the effort but remaining reluctant to get involved. The participants in the call therefore developed a group cohesion and a sense of belonging at the level of their project, but not yet at the level of the neighbourhood.

4.6. Eupen – Park Loten

4.6.1. Tools and methods implemented to reach the specific objectives

Technical means

During this pilot project, many various activities were organized in order to empower and engage citizens in the improvement of public spaces in Bergviertel, including Park Loten.

First, a neighbourhood survey and an event called “**Idea market**” were organized by the project manager to collect information on the needs and ideas of inhabitants for the redevelopment of Park Loten. Their requests and proposals were then transcribed into a set of specifications.

Then, three **participatory workshops** were conducted by a landscape architect with the help of an external facilitator in order to co-design the Park Loten with inhabitants. The first workshop was based on the citizen ideas collected earlier and aimed to arrange them and set priorities. During the second workshop, participants discussed the architect’s preliminary sketches and work on four predefined topics stemming from the first workshop (nature and relaxation; sports and games; meetings and events; children). The third workshop used a scale model to select small projects to be carried out according to the available budget and the most frequently expressed needs. After those workshops, the landscape architect was in charge of finalizing the design plans of the park and inhabitants were encouraged to **co-construct small initiatives** by themselves.

Moreover, an **action plan** was established with social designers from Aachen. The diagnosis highlighted the lack of identity of the neighbourhood, which is a prerequisite for fostering social cohesion. The action plan therefore mainly aims to create a neighbourhood identity through several activities:

- Social events such as a **musical picnic** in the park, a joint **fruit harvest** or a street painting campaign “**Consolation pavement**” in order to reach as many residents as possible;
- Design of a slogan “Bergdrittel - a third is more than a quarter” and a logo representing the three streets surrounding the park, which were then distributed to all mailboxes in the neighbourhood as goodies (stickers, postcards, tattoos, etc.) in a **branding campaign** to initiate a sense of belonging;
- Photo shoot and interviews with residents, resulting in the project “Bergköpfe” (faces of Bergviertel), which used **portraits of citizens** to decorate the fences of a building under construction in order to give a “face” to the neighbourhood.

Those initiatives were all organized by the project manager and the social designers, who were deeply involved in the project and gave the impulse to the neighbourhood dynamics. Afterwards, those actors gradually hand over the responsibilities into the hands of the inhabitants, who independently managed their own actions. Various events are now completely organized by the neighborhood residents, e.g., a **flea market** every last Sunday of the month, a **leaf collection campaign**, the construction of a **giant lantern** for St. Martin's Festival, or a **N-Power in Concert** in the chapel.

The latest community project is the “**Studio Néau Radiocontainer**”, a container housing a temporary radio studio built in the park in cooperation with the ASBL Meakusma. All interested citizens can participate in workshops in order to produce their own radio show under professional guidance. The objective of this project is to teach citizens the skills needed to create a new community radio station, but also to broadcast the programs live in the park in order to attract park visitors and bring them together in a meeting place.

Financial means

The redesign of the park is quite extensive and it is therefore planned to carry out the work in phases in order to progress gradually without having to invest all the money right away. The City has moreover submitted grant applications for **long-term monetary support** to maintain Park Loten and the public spaces of Bergviertel even after the N-power project ends. In the future, **sponsors** may be interested in investing in additional facilities that recall the history of the park and the region. One potential sponsor

is Pierre & Nature Architects, who are building a 50-apartment project called “Die Berggärten” and located right next to Park Loten.

Park Loten is well known for hosting many sporting initiatives since before the N-power project and the “Eupener Sportbund” has already invested in **new sports facilities**. In addition to the existing calisthenic equipment and half a basketball court, this sports federation offered an outdoor ping-pong table, the enlargement of the basketball field and a football area. Eupener Sportbund will also organize a sports festival every spring, thereby dynamizing the revitalization of the park and bringing people together in this place. Two **outdoor event areas** were moreover created in Park Loten, which can be used by the adjacent Jünglingshaus cultural center and Ephata social center (see section 4.6.3).

In addition, alternative financing (e.g., external subsidy, co-production) still needs to be found in order to realize the idea of a “**neighborhood mobile**”. A former waffle cart has already been transformed and refurbished by the municipal workers, and could be used to implement some of citizen ideas on a mobile basis (rolling café, bar or kitchen; mobile information stand, book distribution point, mobile discotheque, multipurpose stage for DJs, bands, theater, etc.). This mobile can be driven with a moped driver's license and is therefore accessible to many neighbors.

4.6.2. Communication and engagement strategies

The project was publicized in the local and regional **press** (Bergviertel news and GrenzEcho newspaper). At the neighbourhood level, a **public billboard** was installed and served both as a communication tool to provide information about the actions in Park Loten, and as a participation tool where citizens could write down their ideas, wishes and problems.

4.6.3. Involved actors, their roles and relationships

The N-power project was initiated by the head of the **Urban Planning and Environment service** (Alexandra Hilgers) with the political support of the mayoress (Claudia Niessen) and the help of the deputy office manager (Ralph Rozein). Within the same service, a dedicated N-power project manager (Benjamin Fleig) was hired at the beginning of the project, in order to work together with environmental managers, street workers and technical managers to cross social and urban competences.

Within the **municipality**, several departments and services were also part of the project: the alderman for education, social affairs, environment and energy (Catherine Brüll), the alderman for building construction, the integration service (Nadège Hilgers), the panel for intercultural dialogue and the commission for intercultural communication.

Benjamin Fleig wears many hats: he is an artist, an inhabitant of Eupen, and he also takes on the brand **new role of neighbourhood manager**. This function was inspired by the cases of Genk and Heerlen and specifically created to facilitate citizen participation and enable more advanced forms of empowerment. The project manager is thus a catalyst between the neighbourhood and the municipality, ensuring the implementation of projects and the organisation of participatory events. To conduct this mission, he also collaborated with two external contractors: a **landscape architect** (Benjamin Dethier from the architecture office “Freiraum”) and **social designers** from Aachen. The mobilisation of citizens, and in particular young people, was ensured by **street social workers** (Yves Gustin and Céline Taeter) who are operating in a structure that is independent of the City.

Many **social and cultural associations** took part in the project: two neighbourhood committees (“Bergviertel-Komitee” and Kapellen-Komitee); two cultural centres (Jünglingshaus and Kolpinghaus); a Muslim Ahmadiyya community centre; the youth centre “Inside”; the social welfare centre; the senior home and scouts. Moreover, a 10-people N-power project group meets monthly.

In particular, the **Ephata Animation Centre** has played an important role in the project. As a long-standing social meeting place, it ensures the social revitalization of the neighbourhood through its diverse offer (e.g., homework school, language café, social workshops, etc.). Ephata is located directly

in the pilot area and serves as the office of the project manager as well as the central contact point for activities (meetings, workshops and events) organised to raise awareness among target groups and strengthen the identity of the neighbourhood.

4.6.4. Challenges and adaptations

The main difficulty of this empowerment project was to **create a social identity** within the Bergviertel neighbourhood. Indeed, this first step takes long but is essential to enable citizens to take responsibility and co-construct their own projects. Generating an identity for the district therefore required a great deal of investment on the part of the project manager who, as a resident of the district himself, sometimes found it difficult to separate his work from his private life.

In addition, the project has focused more on this identity creation than on empowerment, which is the next step to be taken. At the moment, citizens are very enthusiastic about making things happen together, but this intention has not yet been transformed into many concrete actions. Residents are only weakly motivated to become more committed, as social cohesion still needs to be strengthened due to the extreme diversity of the neighbourhood (age, ethnicity, religion, aspiration, mixed urban and rural structures, etc.).

Due to the Covid-19 crisis, some activities could not take place and some empowerment techniques could not be tested (e.g., guerrilla marketing, merchandizing, stencil on sidewalks).

4.6.5. Impacts on the neighbourhood

On the space

or many citizens of other parts of the city, Bergviertel was not clearly defined, and even the inhabitants of this neighbourhood were often unaware of its exact geographical boundaries. Because the Park Loten was not visible from the streets, many citizens of Eupen did not know where it was located. This situation is changing and **the park is becoming known** to the inhabitants of all the districts of Eupen. It is especially appreciated by residents who do not have a private garden.

As expected, the restructuring of the park has significantly increased its use, but also diversified its use. In addition to using the sports elements, visitors and residents alike see the park as **a social meeting place** for the neighbourhood. For example, some residents organize a flea market in the park, the Bosnian community ELIF wants to hold its summer meetings there, and the Jünglingshaus cultural centre is also increasingly scheduling outdoor events there. The redevelopment of the park has thus transformed it into a convivial place where the togetherness of the different ethnic groups and different generations increases.

On the City administration

In general in Eupen, the trust of municipality in its citizens is high. During this pilot, all services of the City administration have shown a real open-mindedness towards the N-power project and a willingness to include citizens in the redevelopment of their neighbourhood. This would not have been possible without the project manager who acted as an intermediary facilitating the relationship between the municipality and the citizens. On the one hand, the City administration gave greater credit to citizens' concerns and design suggestions because they were reported by the project manager and came directly from the local neighbourhood. On the other hand, as a municipal employee, the project manager could increase the citizens' understanding of the administrative processes and manage their expectations. This experience demonstrates the effectiveness of a bridge function that allows more direct access to citizens and local issues. In the future, this **new function of neighbourhood manager**, which was not yet institutionalised, should therefore be maintained at the level of the municipality of Eupen.

On the citizens

Many inhabitants of Bergviertel have been reached by the project: from children to senior citizens, mostly people from lower-income social classes, but also economically better-off citizens. However, only a small proportion of them now know how to initiate and carry out their own small-scale initiatives

in response to their concerns. On an individual level, some citizens are therefore developing personal responsibility and reliability, realizing that the city is not the municipality, but citizens themselves. Other citizens have developed specific skills, whether it be setting up a project, organising a flea market or broadcasting their own radio show.

From a collective point of view, the power of **solidarity** has become evident and residents have a greater respect for the park, which they take as their own. The activities organized in the Park Loten moreover contribute to bring more people together and motivate more and more residents to get involved and stay involved in their neighbourhood. Their motivation is reinforced by an **increased confidence in the municipality**, as citizens have noticed that their concerns are really taken into account and implemented more quickly.

The process of building the identity of the neighbourhood is ongoing, but could in the future improve community spirit and social cohesion. Even though the Bergviertel neighbourhood is still subject to many prejudices, the N-power project helped to **change its image** both in the eyes of residents and in the eyes of people from other areas. For instance, more non-resident scout units are organizing their games in Park Loten and citizens from other parts of the city come to walk around.

4.7. Verviers – Prés-Javais neighbourhood

4.7.1. Tools and methods implemented to reach the specific objectives

Technical means

This pilot project in Prés-Javais is mainly based on **tactical urban planning** techniques, which aim to make small-scale, low-cost changes to public spaces in order to improve the living environment in the short term and potentially in the longer term. To this end, a number of small initiatives to beautify and activate the neighbourhood have been carried out: **colouring and decoration of street furniture** (benches, sidewalk poles and trash bins) and painting of a collective **mural fresco** in Plaine Lentz, which is part of a frescoes tour called “Dire nous”, aimed at communicating a peaceful message about social cohesion and diversity in Verviers.

In addition, the N-power project is part of the larger urban renewal programme “Prés-Javais se tisse”. To ensure consistency between both initiatives and to build on the local challenges previously identified, **meetings** were held with the N-power project manager, politicians and the architectural firm AUPa that has conducted a participatory process to establish a diagnosis of the neighbourhood. Regular meetings were moreover organized with the citizen taskforce (see section 4.7.3).

Furthermore, various **events and activities** took place in the neighbourhood to allow citizens to gather and meet: flea market, picnic, street festival...

Financial means

The city of Verviers has recently acquired a building that could be used as a **neighbourhood house** or youth centre. Pending the renovation of this building in poor condition, the “youth centre” is currently hosted by the “Papoterie”, a room belonging to the City, used by the social workers from the Prevention Plan but accessible to all inhabitants.

During the N-power project, other **premises** were made available by Atelier du Prince (see section 4.7.3) in order to conduct the creative workshops. In a low-cost approach, the **materials and equipment** needed to paint and decorate the street furniture were generally donated or salvaged.

4.7.2. Communication and engagement strategies

This pilot was communicated through several channels: **door-to-door** visits, distribution of **flyers** on the main initiatives, **interviews** given on the local television of Verviers (Vedia), etc. Moreover, a **Facebook group** has been created and managed by a group of inhabitants in order to inform their fellow citizens

about the N-power project and news from the neighbourhood. Another strategy that was used to engage people in the project is the creation of an **identity** (name and logo) for the neighbourhood.

4.7.3. Involved actors, their roles and relationships

The N-power **project manager** is Louisa Kara, who was newly hired within the service of Social Cohesion to fulfil this specific role. She is the intermediary between the City administration and the inhabitants, as well as the coordinator of the citizen taskforce, to whom she provides financial and administrative support. In practice, she worked in close collaboration with the **social workers from the Social Cohesion Plan and the Prevention Plan**. These intermediaries have a very good knowledge of the local context and have recurrent contacts with the inhabitants, and they could therefore help the project manager to better understand the current dynamics in the neighbourhood and the internal functioning of the City administration. The other city departments and the municipal college had little involvement in the project. On a higher administrative level, the General Service of the **Inspectorate of Culture** from the Wallonia-Brussels Federation supported the neighbourhood house project.

Throughout the N-power project, local creative and cultural actors supported the citizens and helped them improve their neighbourhood. For the urban furniture improvement workshops, children and young people were mobilized and supervised with the help of the homework school "**La Page**" and the creative association "**Atelier du Prince**". For the participatory fresco realized within the framework of the project "**Dire nous**", local and international artists painted a mural reflecting the life of the Prés-Javais neighbourhood. The fresco is accompanied by a text written by "**Rêverie Commune**" based on testimonies collected from the inhabitants of Prés-Javais. In addition, the creative hubs of Liege and Verviers, the youth house "Maison des jeunes des Récollets", the cultural centre of Verviers, the regional centre for integration of Verviers and other neighbourhood organizations were also key partners.

Regarding the citizens involved in the project, the core **citizen taskforce** is mainly composed of participants from the neighbourhood committee "Prés-Javais Revit" (Prés-Javais lives again) and the municipal commission for urban renewal (CCRU). From these few citizens, others have gradually joined the project.

4.7.4. Challenges and adaptations

The main challenge of this pilot project was the **limited support** the project manager received from his superiors in the municipal administration. Despite her efforts to convince and mobilise her hierarchy, there is an obvious lack of understanding of the project among the political leaders and heads of the administration and thus no will to internalize the empowerment approach. The project thus suffered from sometimes tense relationships with the aldermen, who were expected to meet the inhabitants and support their initiatives. The alderman who was at the origin of the urban renewal project (Malik Ben Achour) has nevertheless given a lot of support to the neighbourhood and has backed the fresco project. Since he became a deputy in 2019, however, the follow-up is almost non-existent and the other aldermen have not taken over, except by attending the picnic or partner meetings for example.

The project manager therefore had to coordinate all the citizen initiatives by herself, which was all the more difficult since she knew neither the city nor the neighbourhood. Fortunately, she could count on the help of social workers to get in touch with the inhabitants. However, social workers in turn encountered difficulties in engaging residents in the pilot project for several reasons: the cultural diversity of the neighbourhood, the lack of links between local associations, the low rate of presence of the inhabitants of Prés-Javais in these associations the personal rather than collective nature of the requests expressed by some citizens, the **demotivation of citizens** who participated in previous urban renewal meetings and refuse to get more involved given the lack of concrete results. The N-power project is thus seen as a redundant participatory initiative and citizens do not want to propose more ideas, but to see the ones they have already proposed implemented.

Finally, three major crises disrupted the smooth running of the project. First, the Covid-19 **health crisis** led to the cancellation or postponement of some events (Easter egg hunt, spring fest, flea market, inauguration of the mural fresco, panna contest). Second, the **political crisis** that occurred between June 2020 and September 2021 in Verviers created an unfavourable climate for citizen participation. Third, the **floods** of July 2021 strongly affected the Prés-Javais neighbourhood and increased the vulnerability of some inhabitants. It also delayed the renovation of the house purchased by the city and the whole urban renewal project, which were already slow to get off the ground.

4.7.5. Impacts on the neighbourhood

On the space

Prés-Javais is a convivial neighbourhood, but it suffers from a very negative reputation and is not sufficiently promoted. The embellishment of the area with new and redecorated street furniture is well received by the local residents and interested the local media. The spatial transformation and activation have helped to bring people together, as they occupy more public spaces, and especially appreciate those that are now more colourful. Thanks to the new fresco, Prés-Javais has even managed to put itself on the map of street art in Verviers. The N-power pilot project has thus not only improved the **aesthetics** of the neighbourhood, but has also improved its **perception** beyond its borders, in Verviers and even in other cities.

On the City administration

Through this pilot project, the project manager and the social workers joined forces to involve citizens in neighbourhood development projects. The services of the Social Cohesion Plan and the Prevention Plan therefore see the N-power project as an extension of the social actions they already carry out on a daily basis with citizens. However, the other services within the City administration are **still reluctant to involve citizens** in the identification of the initiatives that should be developed in the neighbourhood, and usually keep imposing their urban projects without soliciting the citizens, the project manager or the social workers.

This overall lack of participatory openness leads to **distrust** and even hatred on the part of citizens towards politicians, whom they lump together with the “City administration” under the single name of “the City”. Nevertheless, the project manager and the social workers have gradually gained more visibility and confidence among the inhabitants. The **collaborative work** between an urban project and social workers thus proved to be successful and could serve as an example to deepen the interactions between the different City services currently characterized by few curiosity and a “to each their own” mindset.

On the citizens

This pilot project included participants between the ages of 18 and 90 with moderate to low incomes, but also children, teens and unemployed youth. Through urban beautification initiatives, they have developed their artistic skills. Some citizens, especially the ones from the citizen taskforce, have moreover developed new networking and leadership skills. Thanks to the rapid realization of small concrete actions (quick wins), they realized that they could have a real impact on their living environment, which encourages them to come up with new ideas and projects. This has helped to create a relationship of trust between the inhabitants and the social workers, even if this new trust towards “the City” is very fragile in the current political context.

From a collective point of view, the project allowed residents to meet, rediscover each other and reaffirm the identity of their neighbourhood. Thanks to the outdoor actions, non-involved passers-by have been made aware of the project and have exchanged on the spot with the participants about the neighbourhood. The citizen taskforce also acts as an ambassador to promote the project to their friends and fellow citizens. This improves solidarity, sense of community and social cohesion, and gradually pushes new people to get involved in their neighbourhood. Even if there is still a lack of an overall structure and if many citizens remain enthusiastic spectators, several isolated projects are running and

are expected to progressively attract more motivated citizens. In particular, the neighbourhood house is a very unifying project that brings together various citizen profiles.

4.8. Aachen – Aachen east and North

4.8.1. Tools and methods implemented to reach the specific objectives

Technical means

The empowerment strategy of this pilot project relies on several tools, which are different for each of the three main objectives presented earlier (see section 3.8.3).

As far as the **digital participation** is concerned, the first idea was to develop a digital platform for citizen participation. However, this was soon abandoned because such a platform was considered redundant with the Facebook page of the City. Therefore, the pilot project evolved into the development of another digital tool as a participatory opportunity. An online **Energy Game** was created in collaboration with a university institute called JERI, which is specialized in energy consumption needs and behaviours. Through the game, people can manage characters by choosing their lifestyle behaviours and observing the consequences on carbon emissions and on their personal budgets. This is a playful way to transmit energy-related knowledge to the local population, and especially to low income residents, and to question their opinions about digital and ecological neighbourhoods.

Regarding the **digital training** of inhabitants, two main events were organized. Firstly, **Digital Holiday Games** aim to initiate youth to digital topics through fun and creative experiences such as programming, 3D printing, building robots, making animated films, creating a digital tour of the neighbourhood or visiting companies that are digitally-active in the neighbourhood. At the beginning, this one-week summer school was planned to be conducted both in Aachen North and in Aachen East, but there was finally only one edition in a secondary school of Aachen North. A total of twelve kids were involved and programmed a remote controlled car with the help of three experts. Secondly, an “**Aktionstag**” (Action Day) was held in order to match local businesses (SMEs) and possible trainees.

As far as **collaborations** are concerned, other public events took place in order to develop relationships between local institutions, associations and citizens. For instance, a booth placed at a neighbourhood event provided an overview of the N-power project. Within the administration, the project manager also participated to internal meetings and communicated by phone with the neighbourhood managers.

Financial means

In order to support the training of participants, **digital aids** were created in order to offer free software and hardware. In addition to this financial support, two material resources were also mobilized. On the one hand, a **lab** was installed in the city as a venue for citizens to play the energy game. On the second hand, the project manager was provided with a **temporary workplace** in the pilot neighbourhood, and more specifically at the Digital Church (DigiHub).

4.8.2. Communication and engagement strategies

In order to recruit participants to the Action Day, **flyers** were produced by retired people who became familiar with the use of the computer during the N-power project. In addition, a **newsletter** was created by the district managers to communicate the project to all stakeholders (citizens, associations, SMEs and local authorities).

4.8.3. Involved actors, their roles and relationships

Over the course of the N-power project, three city officers from the department of Economy, Science, Digitalization and Europe took on the role of **project manager** for about one year each (first Barbara Hamacher, then Nils Tenkleve and finally Alexander Barg). This succession of project managers was intentional, with the role being defined by the City through a fixed-term contract.

This pilot project differs from previous ones in that it is economically oriented and the project manager belongs to a technical department that is usually detached from social affairs. The project manager was therefore assisted by the **neighbourhood managers**, who operate within the department of Living, Social Issues and Integration and are in direct contact with the inhabitants and the **neighbourhood committee** of Aachen North. The other City services and elected representatives had very little involvement in the project, even though some politicians and the department of Children, Youth and School took part with local inhabitants to a district conference and a management panel for the neighbourhood.

The project is supported by many local and regional organisations in order to improve the professional integration and the digital education and of the inhabitants of Aachen. **Low-tec gGmbH** is a non-profit employment and qualification company. **WABE e.V.** is a non-profit association that provides child and youth welfare services and educational programs. **Sozialwerk Aachener Christen** is an ecclesiastical charitable organization of social workers. The **Zdi Netzwerk Aachen and Kreis Heinsberg** is a regional network that offers digital and technical services for children and youth in order to recruit STEM talents (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics). **IT4Kids** is a nationwide student initiative that accompanies schools to give all children access to digital education and teaches them to code.

Schools and universities are also key partners in this project. The Energy Game was designed by an institute called **JERI** (Junior Professorship for Energy Resource and Innovation Economics) from the Faculty of Economics, RWTH Aachen University. Representatives from the department of urban planning, **RWTH Aachen University**, and from the department of social work, **FH Aachen** - University of Applied Sciences, were also involved in the project.

4.8.4. Challenges and adaptations

The **Covid-19 restrictions** had a great impact on the project, with several intended actions and planned activities having to be cancelled (e.g., implementation of the ideas proposed by citizens on the digital platform; creation of a mobile OpenLab as a digital training centre; workshop introducing digital programming to children with a small robot) or postponed after the N-power project (e.g. creation of a Coding School with the help of professional developers and mentors from the social start-up CodeDoor; summer party organized by the neighbourhood committee to promote the coding project).

The **inability to meet face-to-face** was very problematic, as it increased the difficulty of reaching the most vulnerable citizens. They do not always have access to digital technologies and generally speak a low level of German or English, which does not allow the project to be carried out at a distance and creates major communication problems.

The delays caused by the health crisis were all the more damaging as the project had already struggled to get off the ground. Indeed, the project manager found it difficult to recruit participants, as citizens are generally very **sceptical about any initiative coming from the City**. Despite the lack of motivation on the part of the inhabitants, some activities (Action Day, Energy Game and Digital Holiday Games) were eventually set up with the help of the neighbourhood manager.

4.8.5. Impacts on the neighbourhood

On the space

Given the empowerment strategy adopted in this pilot project, there is no impact on the physical space of the neighbourhood. Indeed,

On the City administration

The difficulties encountered by the project manager to get in touch with certain groups of citizens demonstrated that there is a lack of intermediate human resources allocated to communication and interaction between the City administration, local associations and citizens. Through this experience and by taking inspiration from the other partners' pilot projects, the City of Aachen has thus realised that it is not always necessary to take on all the tasks, such as mobilising and empowering citizens, and

that it is sometimes better to provide a appropriate framework and to support it with the available City resources (not only money-based, but also network-based). This cultural change has not yet been achieved, however, as it requires more support and trust from the city towards citizen initiatives.

On the citizens

The most successful activity was the Action Day, which will probably be repeated in the future. However, the citizens present at the first edition were mainly workers and it is still difficult to reach the target audience (unemployed and job seekers in particular). The main benefit of the Action Day has therefore been the linking of small and medium-sized enterprises with social facilities, whose beneficiaries and volunteers are very satisfied with the project. For the participants, the project has also created a great deal of solidarity and pride in the progress made.

4.9. Heerlen – micro-initiatives in Heerlen North

4.9.1. Tools and methods implemented to reach the specific objectives

Technical means

Similar to Genk and in contrast to the other pilot projects, this project in Heerlen is mainly based on the **introduction of new human means** to support **micro initiatives** (see section 4.9.3) rather than the development of specific participatory techniques. Citizen empowerment here goes beyond the use of classical participatory processes, since it is the citizens themselves who develop their project from A to Z, from planning to maintenance, through the formation of a working group, ideation, acquisition of funds, implementation and even the consultation of their fellow citizens.

This bottom-up approach is however facilitated by various innovative tools to help citizens develop their projects. First, the **Gebrookerbos Academy** organises workshops and conferences to exchange the knowledge developed by citizens (funding, branding, finding and keeping volunteers, insurance, etc.) and by the local government, account managers and social organizations (cultural change, role of the municipality in empowerment, etc.). Then, the **Gebrookerbos Network** brings together hundreds of committed citizens who mobilize their own network in order to constitute small communities that will in turn propose further initiatives. A **digital platform** was created in order to create this network, get in touch, maintain contact between people, centralize information and present all citizens' initiatives. For each micro initiative, a contract called "**neighbourhood deal**" is established between the City and the citizens who commit themselves to guarantee the maintenance of their projects.

Financial means

Several means have been implemented to help citizens find the necessary resources for their projects: a **digital platform for crowdfunding** was launched, **vacant spaces** in the neighbourhood were made available for temporary or permanent occupancy and citizens learned to submit **grant applications**. Moreover, the **Gebrookerbos Fund** was introduced to help citizens start their initiatives. This subvention of up to 10,000€ is managed by the account managers and is awarded to all initiators as long as they commit to providing a photo or video report that shows how the money was used. Furthermore, some small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) like IBA Parkstad, Lochty, L'Ortye or Monuta invest in the project by providing financial resources, goods and services.

4.9.2. Communication and engagement strategies

In order to engage citizens in the project, several recruitment tools were used such as personal contacts, neighbourhood meetings, social media, door-to-door surveys, newspapers or flyers. Communication was also provided through multiple workshops, meetings, a book and the digital platform. It should be noted that participants now use their own means of communication and sharing (Facebook, WhatsApp) and the platform is mainly used by the province or external people who want more information about the Gebrookerbos method. Local and provincial news media moreover promoted the project.

4.9.3. Involved actors, their roles and relationships

In Heerlen, the N-power project aims to test and implement the “Gebrookerbos method”, which is part of a broad restructuring program. The neighbourhood development strategy is led by the city's general management, headed by the mayor and cross-cutting all departments. The project is not only supported within the municipal administration, but also by the Province of Limburg and local **political parties** that help with the integration of the initiatives into the global city dynamic. Within the City administration, the **project manager** (Kelly Damoiseaux) ensures the general coordination and communication of the N-power pilot project and facilitates the integration of the Gebrookerbos culture, while the **program manager** establishes a relationship between the micro initiatives (bottom-up) and the macro projects (top-down) in the neighbourhood. To build up community projects in Heerlen North, new key roles were moreover created:

- An independent **Brooker** (Jos Reinders) supports bottom-up initiatives and connects the different parties (politicians, city officers, residents...). He is supervised by Neimed and salaried by Alcander.
 - > **Neimed** is the knowledge centre for the promotion of the socio-economic resilience of Limburg and an academic network of experts from Zuyd University of Applied Sciences, Open University and Maastricht University.
 - > **Alcander** is a social welfare organisation in Heerlen.
- Six municipal **account managers** act as contact persons to guide citizens through the administrative apparatus.
- An **engagement marketer** (Linda Frints, Open University) ensures the visibility of citizens’ initiatives and a relevant and personal communication according to individual needs of the target group. She moreover binds all stakeholders to emphasize their respective knowledge.

In addition, the project is part of a scientific research conducted by Neimed (in particular, Samira Louali) in order to document the whole Gebrookerbos methodology so that other cities can transpose it to their local contexts. The universities are therefore particularly active on the project, as for example the students of Zuyd University who helped the citizens with some specific topics. Depending on the subject, other **external experts** were sometimes invited during the workshops.

Finally, the main human resources of this pilot project are the **inhabitants** themselves. The initiators of micro projects are generally open-minded people who are well established in the neighbourhood and have a good knowledge of the area and population. They may be private citizens, local entrepreneurs or community groups. There is no formal neighbourhood committee in Heerlen North, but there are various **neighbourhood foundations**. For instance, the foundation “Stichting Buurbeheer” headed by Jo Hermanns organized a citizen consultation and got the Gebrookerbos fund to redevelop and co-maintain the Bongaard Park with the residents.

4.9.4. Challenges and adaptations

Given its innovative approach, the main challenge of this pilot project was to **define the roles** of all the new actors of the Gebrookerbos method, in particular those of Brooker and account managers. The clarification of these functions will make it possible to identify the skills needed to perform them and to integrate them more easily into the existing operations of the administration. Although the city is very supportive of the project, it is still a challenge to introduce such a **cultural change** within a municipality.

Indeed, the Brooker has to manage two **different organizational patterns**. On the one hand, citizens’ bottom-up initiatives are flexible and personalized and, on the other hand, official procedures and top-down policies are rigid and systematized. Therefore, there is still work to be done to facilitate the relationship and build trust between local government and citizens.

In addition, the project also requires a change of citizens’ mindset to commit to launching and developing their own initiatives. Through this pilot project, participants are generally middle-class while the more vulnerable groups are still very difficult to reach out. Initiators moreover realized how difficult

it is to ensure the **long-term sustainability** of their project, whether it is keeping volunteers motivated, dealing with administrative delays, or finding the funds to maintain their project.

4.9.5. Impacts on the neighbourhood

On the space

The Gebrookerbos method resulted in the regeneration of hundreds of thousands of square meters of **vacant space** in the neighbourhood. Citizen-led projects can be divided into three main categories: touristic and recreative network (e.g., bed and breakfast), nature (e.g., life-course forest where each inhabitant can plant a tree) and urban agriculture (e.g., forgotten vegetable garden). Through these micro initiatives, dilapidated spaces formerly suffering from vandalism and nuisance were activated and transformed into pleasant and accessible living and meeting places, which are appropriated by the local inhabitants.

Because they were created by residents, these spaces have a strong **sense of ownership**, which helps to create a virtuous circle. Citizens feel at home in these areas of the neighbourhood and therefore take great care of them, which could encourage them in the future not to leave Heerlen and hopefully stop the shrinkage. Citizens' initiative moreover make the area more attractive for SMEs.

Another advantage of multiplying small-scale projects is that the concrete result is quickly visible. The micro initiatives thus have a positive impact on the image of the neighbourhood. This moreover increases the **visibility of the Gebrookerbos method**, leading to additional micro initiatives being realized in Heerlen, even sometimes outside the neighbourhood.

On the City administration

With the Gebrookerbos method, the city of Heerlen has taken the risk of changing its usual operation and giving more power to the inhabitants of the municipality. This experiment would not have worked without the key role of the decentralized Brooker, who has more freedom than a city officer and can therefore establish better contact with the citizens. Since the Brooker is a facilitator and not a leader, citizens feel more responsible for their own initiatives. The openness and trust in the citizens has thus been rewarded with the implementation of many micro initiatives in the Heerlen North neighbourhood. The citizens have demonstrated that they are trustworthy and ready to take their responsibilities, which encourages the City administration to "let go" more.

On the citizens

Given the strong involvement of citizens in the conduct of their projects, the participants gained a lot from the project on a personal level. They learned how to create, manage and sustain their own initiatives in order to independently improve the quality of life in their neighbourhood. Whether they are initiators, volunteers recruited later or even followers who joined a project later, they generally expanded their **network**, made new friends and improved their social skills. Citizens' cooperation in turn increased social cohesion.

As a group, participants developed trust in themselves and others and learned to rely on each other. The N-power project helped to improve their confidence in the City administration and government, as well as their commitment to their neighbourhood. Citizens moreover learned to stop asking the city to take care of their concerns and to become **self-reliant** and ask for help when needed. The Gebrookerbos method thus supported citizens in their actions, making them increasingly **proud** of their role, their initiatives and their neighbourhood.

All stakeholders realized that it was actually possible to transform a neighbourhood through citizens' initiatives and that this ultimately required more human than financial resources. This encourages other residents to come up with new ideas for the neighbourhood. This **snowball effect** is reinforced by the dissemination of the initiatives by their citizen ambassadors in order to inspire other people to become part of the Gebrookerbos network.

5. Results and evaluation

5.1. Governance

5.1.1. Political vision and administrative organization

The seven Cities involved in the N-power project are undergoing a neighbourhood regeneration process, which is more or less institutionalized. In Aachen, Genk and Heerlen, there is a formal and integrated regeneration programme at the city scale while more punctual regeneration projects and plans are developed in Eupen, Liège, Seraing and Verviers. There is therefore a different political and organizational approach between the four Walloon cities and the three other pilot cities, where supplemental municipal agents called “neighbourhood managers” (NM) operate as facilitators between the City and the citizens. There is still **different degrees of integration or autonomy** of those neighbourhood managers within the City governance:

- In Aachen, the NMs are attached to a regular department of the City;
- In Genk, the NMs work in a dedicated department of neighbourhood development;
- In Heerlen, the NMs are municipal officers called “account managers” and an independent “Brooker” who is not attached to the municipality in order to ease the contact with inhabitants.

Those “new” inspiring roles proved to be very effective to integrate a neighbourhood approach, and especially to test innovative empowerment strategies. In Genk and Heerlen, the N-power project already had a solid foundation to start directly because the whole organization was already there and supported by the politics. In Aachen, this was a little more complicated because the City saw the project as an opportunity to expand the existing neighbourhood approach to another department, which was less familiar with the neighbourhood context and required more work to establish a contact between the different stakeholders. Moreover, the N-power project manager was a one-year position and therefore changed three times along the way, demonstrating a lack of stability in the neighbourhood approach. In the same way, the N-power project team also changed in Seraing during the project, making it more difficult to keep a coherent overview and to maintain contacts with the neighbourhood. In the four Walloon cities, there was a lack of history in neighbourhood management and the project managers were either recruited in related departments (Eupen, Liège, Seraing) or hired specifically for the N-power project (Verviers). In those cases, N-power is thus **a project among others that could initiate empowerment practices in local contexts**, while in the other more mature cities, N-power was an additional project in line with an existing strategy and **an opportunity to extend a global neighborhood dynamic**. This “extension” takes different forms :

- In Aachen, creating a link between the NMs and a more technical part of the City, the Department of Economy, in order to work on the digital inclusion and inhabitants’ integration into the labour market;
- In Genk, developing the neighbourhood approach in the City centre, a deprived neighbourhood which had no NM and suffers, among others, from a low community life;
- In Heerlen, defining the different roles of neighborhood actors, creating new roles and testing the “Gebrookerbos” model before expanding the model to the whole city and hiring more Brookers.

The official and evolutive character of neighborhood management in Genk and Heerlen, as well as the resources made available, in those three cities demonstrates **the importance placed on participatory neighborhood development and the political willingness to sustain it on the City scale**. The situation is a bit more ambiguous in Aachen, because there is no big support nor specific blockage from the City, but rather a passive acceptance and a priority given to more urgent issues (Covid-19, floods, closing of a big company). The political vision in the Walloon cities is even less supportive because N-power is one of the triggers that generated some interest in empowerment but this was not a clear objective prior to the start of the project. Thus, project managers had to convince their hierarchy that this project was important and to develop sustainable relationships with stakeholders almost from scratch, while also progressively developing their own understanding of empowerment and neighborhood management.

Sometimes, the project manager was the only one to be informed and convinced that empowering neighborhoods could help with more global challenges at the city scale. This could be discouraging because there was **low recognition** of the project managers' involvement and work, and their low integration with other City services and departments.

This was especially the case in Verviers, where the project manager was new in the City and had to deal with a new municipal organization. Indeed, the social cohesion plan and prevention plan used to be the same service, but have recently been separated. This multiplies the number of interlocutors, both for the project manager and the citizens, even though a certain horizontality still remains from the past link between the two services. In contrast to this evolution towards municipal partitioning, the City of Liège explains that there are more and more transversality between the different departments, that cooperate more and more often on collective projects rather than on projects only and directly related to their own field of expertise as it was the case 20 years ago. In Seraing, the work in silos also caused problems in terms of clarity in communication towards the public because parallel projects were sometimes close to N-power, which created redundancies for citizens that feel highly solicited but do not see so many changes in their neighborhood. Looking at the objectives of all pilot Cities, N-power is seen as a good **opportunity to experiment a new transversal operation between different services**, but also to create horizontal links with the associative network and the inhabitants.

Beyond transversality within the municipal administration, Heerlen and Genk are characterized by the autonomy of the social workers who are detached from the City and are part of **external organizations**. Those autonomous field workers therefore benefit from greater flexibility, autonomy and trust from citizens. For Genk, there is moreover a common vision on the scale of the Flemish region, where social work is an horizontal effort with shared principles and strategies. This approach is not clearer for citizens, because it adds extra actors, but facilitates the day-to-day work of social workers by reducing the number of authorizations and the processing time for certain requests.

5.1.2. Adoption of neighborhood regeneration and empowerment approaches

We saw that every City has a different starting point in this project, but this was also a way to exchange between the different pilots and to discover various experiences. The project managers and other partners from all cities indeed benefited from the same guidance during the project and learned a lot from each other during the N-power meetings and trainings. Inspired by Genk and Heerlen cases, Eupen for instance decided to maintain the project manager as a neighborhood manager in the future, after the end of the N-power project. This intention is very encouraging because it demonstrates **a mindset shift in the City**, allowing more resources to neighborhood management and empowerment than before. Those changes of mind and organization that progressively took place during the N-power project are sometimes very small in the Walloon cities, but show a new awareness among local authorities to potentially change their practices in the future, one step at the time, since they have seen the benefits in other pilot projects. However, we may also notice a big change in Liège where citizen participation is now included in the new development plan of the Public Reading Service (libraires). In addition, the "conviviality space" that was quite late added in the project aims to be developed into a community place managed by the citizens themselves.

The different rhythm of appropriation of empowerment techniques and neighbourhood approaches reminds us of Roger's diffusion of innovation theory. According to Rogers (1983 [1962]), public adoption of new products follows a normal distribution over time. As illustrated in Figure 1, each segment of the curve corresponds to a typical consumer profile, to which Rogers attributes personality characteristics. He thus defines five profiles: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards, which are distinguished by a lower and lower speed of adoption, risk-taking and interest in novelty. If we consider here that the product is "empowerment" and the consumers are the municipalities, we can consider that Heerlen is an innovator, Genk an early adopter, Aachen belongs to the early majority, as does Eupen if it maintains its NM and Liège if it develops the conviviality space, and the other Walloon cities are the late majority, or even laggards at the beginning. In other words, it seems that Walloon

municipalities have a lower disposition to new ideas and organisational changes, while the other ones are more enthusiastic towards innovation, which represents a huge **cultural difference between geographically-close cities**.

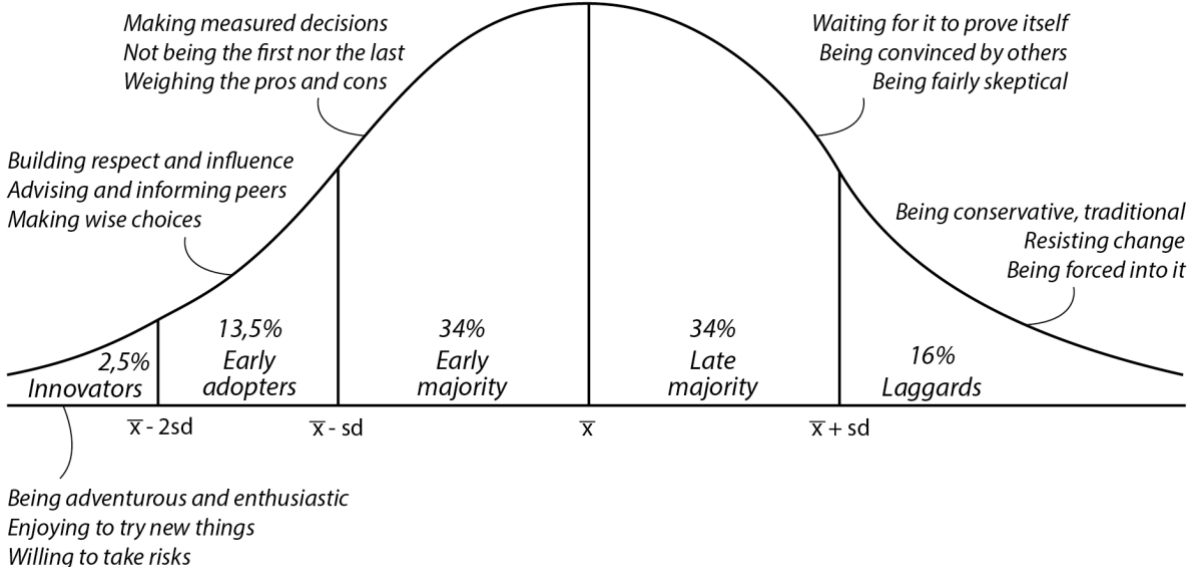


Figure 1 – Diffusion of innovation theory (adapted from Rogers, 1983 [1962]).

This appropriation level therefore shows a different level of maturity in each City in integrating an empowerment approach. While the most mature cities are putting empowerment in a global logic and have a will to make it sustainable, other cities are only starting to think about how to launch the machine. The maturity can also be observed through the nature of the neighbourhood development approach, be it place-based, people-based or community-based, as explained in the following section.

5.1.3. Place-, people- or community-based strategies

The N-power project promotes a governance transition from place to community, as illustrated in Figure 2. In this model, the improvement of the place becomes secondary, either a side-effect or an entry point to engage people. The ultimate objective is thus to progressively complete neighbourhood regeneration programmes with strategies aiming at personal empowerment (PE) and community empowerment (CE).



Figure 2 – The governance transition from place-based neighborhood regeneration towards people and community empowerment (Source: Christine Ruelle).

In practice, we observed that this governance transition is still ongoing at the end of the N-power project. Our results show that it takes time and progresses very differently across contexts. Our research indeed shows, through the analysis of the seven pilot empowerment projects, a highly variable level of internalization of the empowerment agenda within the neighbourhood regeneration programme of local authorities.

As illustrated in Figure 3, the ‘place’ objective remains more present than PE and CE, even though more and more attention is paid to the individuals who are encouraged to develop their personal capacities mainly by involving them in the planning process. However, this involvement is only for a short period of time so this empowerment strategy cannot be considered as effective in integrating the ‘place’ and ‘people’ objectives. This approach is particularly anchored in the Walloon cities, where all projects mainly focuses on (co)designing parks and often limit inhabitants’ participation to consultation. In most cities, the tools and methods implemented so far do not manage to create opportunities for CE, even if some Cities progressively support more active citizenship by encouraging citizens to collectively develop and implement small projects. In Verviers, field social actors estimate that it is too soon to reach community empowerment, partly because underprivileged citizens should first work on themselves before being able to take care of their neighbourhood and the community wellbeing. Only in Heerlen the empowerment strategy seems to offer a real opportunity for CE, with citizens being encouraged to take the lead in various collective projects and to meet and exchange with each other project holders, hence promoting the progressive development and self-organisation of the community.

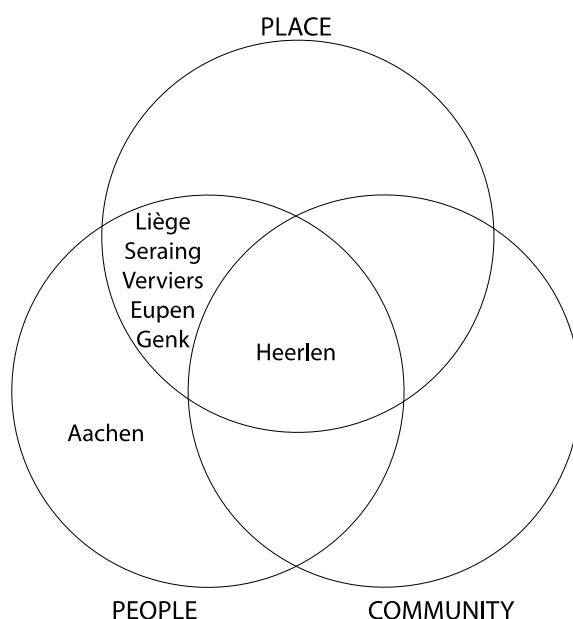


Figure 3 – Place-, people- or/and community-based neighborhood development strategies.

These differences illustrate highly variable levels of understanding, will and capacities (cultural, organisational, technical...) to implement the empowerment agenda. Especially, the political opportunities that are sought, the stakeholders’ visions of local authorities’ role, the institutional arrangements within the local authority, the skills and competencies of the local officers in relation to citizen and community engagement, as well as the level of reflexivity usually present in a local authority seem to explain the highly variable internalization of the empowerment agenda.

In all cases also remains a lack of shared know-how as about how to facilitate PE and CE: ‘what works’ in sharing decision-making with citizens and communities, how to engage the more hard-to-reach groups, what barriers have to be removed, how to promote better opportunities and support those already involved, etc.). This argues in favour of a **stabilization of a formal neighbourhood regeneration**

programme and dedicated city department as a way to progressively build up a network of skilled city actors (NMs, other field social workers) who will together develop approaches that effectively enable to integrate the ‘place’, ‘people’ and ‘community’ objectives of neighbourhood regeneration and achieve personal and community empowerment.

This stabilization of neighbourhood official actors is even more important if we consider that the political framework can change cyclically, with each new mandate of a government and especially in a time of recurrent political crises. In Verviers for instance, some inhabitants are not even aware of who is the current mayor and this creates high confusion. In Seraing, associations and citizens often encounter difficulties in knowing who to contact within the city. Moreover, the multiplication of big participatory projects (N-power, A Place to Be-Come, Master plans), each with its respective leader, creates a certain vagueness for citizens. In their view, all the city actors they meet necessarily work together and should be aware of the initiatives underway, no matter where the funding comes from. There is therefore a need to keep a certain coherence between the various projects as it is the case in Heerlen, Genk or Aachen since neighborhood managers are part of a specific structure that encompasses all related projects. When there is a neighbourhood department, citizens can keep a landmark and local authorities can preserve the continuity of the neighbourhood development, which could help to move from place-based regeneration to community empowerment. We should however note that **political stability**, as it is the case in Liège, presents the potential drawback to stick to usual practices and to take fewer risks in terms of experimentations.

5.1.4. Relationship between citizens and local authority

The N-power project aims to change the classical relationships between inhabitants and local authority, moving from a purely vertical structure to a more horizontal one with a mix of top-down governance and bottom-up initiatives. Compared to some “idealist” discourses that sometimes consider that citizens should get total control over their daily environments, the idea here is to escape from any dualistic vision and to develop long-lasting relationships between citizens and local authorities that build on innovative tools and methods and new intermediate actors to engage citizens in the co-definition (design, construction, creation, management, maintenance...) of their living neighborhood. Through the N-power project, this **shift of power** seems to be only possible if **trust** is developed between all stakeholders, who accept their **changing roles and responsibilities**.

Trust relationship

First of all, it is important to note that the trust is a two-way relationship, i.e. on the one hand the trust from citizens towards the local authority and on the second hand, the trust from local authority towards citizens. In the different cities, this trust is based on previous experiences, pre-existing conditions and current expectations. Through interviews and observations during the whole project, we identify several different trust dynamics.

First, citizens’ trust is influenced by the **feeling of being (un)heard** by local authorities and the **impression of always coming last**. In Liège, Seraing, and Verviers, citizens feel forgotten by the City, because their input in some former projects were often neglected in the end. In Verviers, people have been very disappointed by previous promises, which take many years to be completed, and become disengaged and tired. Following the representatives of one ASBL in Seraing, inhabitants that were consulted in the past remain cautious regarding new participatory opportunities because they are used to the fact that their participation does not yield any concrete results or is far from the expected outcome. This feeling of abandonment is reinforced by the fact that major works are realized elsewhere in the city, but not in their disadvantaged neighbourhood nor in their deteriorated street, which is often left behind. In the same way, citizens in Verviers consider that underprivileged people have less leverage to change the situation, since they had for instance to wait for a local famous football player to personally invest in their neighbourhood. That’s why the project manager mainly focused on small interventions in the public space (e.g., painting of public furniture with the citizens and organization of an annual picnic by the community) leading to quick results and showing citizens their wishes and needs

were heard. In Liège-Droixhe, inhabitants also mistrust the City because of former participatory projects that were just “a beautiful facade” giving a democratic impression. However, they point that the N-power project is different because for once they felt like they have actually been heard in the process since the park will be constructed in accordance with their recommendations.

Moreover, citizens’ trust is influenced by their **level of information**. Indeed, it is important for local authorities to hear what citizens have to say, but it is also important to create a real dialog and to keep citizens in the loop until the end of the project. In former initiatives in Seraing, participants lacked follow-up information about how their participation will influence the course of the project and why the project had to be revised due to external technical considerations. In Liège, inhabitants explained that the N-power project manager gave them enough information in that regard, but they still experienced many communication problems during the recruitment phase. Even though some citizens want to get involved, they are often informed too late, when the participatory workshop are already completed.

Then, citizens’ trust is also related to their **personal situation and self-integration within the City**. In Eupen for instance, people from a foreign culture may have a different relationship with the local authority, so that they do not dare to complain and are afraid to participate. Gaining the trust of those inhabitants therefore requires the presence of a facilitator in order to help them to find their place in their new neighbourhood. It is also worth noting that vulnerable citizens in Seraing or Liège are not used to participate, but are used to being accompanied. They thus need a push from an intermediate actor to initiate their involvement and to build a network, because they may lack the **self-confidence** needed to start their own project. Conversely, in Labiomista or Heerlen, the participatory culture is better anchored and intermediaries are there to support citizens in their bottom-up initiatives, rather than searching for citizens who can be involved in a top-down project.

This self-confidence is also shaped by **the respect and the trust that the local authority places in the inhabitants**. While some politics experience difficulties to give more power to citizens, the N-power project requires to trust the citizens to improve their neighborhood themselves. In Aachen, the pilot is therefore focused on the development of personal empowerment, working on the individual rather than the collective level. In Heerlen, many City officials are convinced that citizens already hold diverse capacities and believe that this is not the role of the City to judge if their initiatives are relevant or worth it. The Brooker defines his role as a coach or a supporter of a citizens’ team, respecting their choices and maybe letting them learn from their mistakes and gain experience. It is completely different in Liège for instance, where the local authorities insist on all the technical constraints of one project in order to justify why citizens’ ideas are rejected.

The local authorities’ trust is also deeply influenced by **the difficulty to recruit and engage citizens**. In Liège for instance, many inhabitants tell that they will participate and then do (or can) not show up on D-day. Of course, participation is not mandatory and people are free to come or not, but their absence can discourage municipal agents to organize events because the commitment made by the citizens is not respected. This is often the case when citizens are individually invited and expected to contribute to a project, but are not the initiators of a collective project themselves. In Heerlen and Genk, we observe that the City tend to trust more citizens’ organizations and structured groups (Maria-Gewanden Neighborhood Foundation, Nomadgroup...) than individuals, because they are more independent, active and visible. Those groups also act as catalysts to progressively create citizen congregations that will in turn become more trust-worthy and maintain long-term relationships with the City. Even if it gives them more legitimacy and more chance to obtain funding, some citizen groups in Heerlen do not want to become an official organ because they prefer to keep an horizontal structure.

Shift of power

Mutual trust is a prerequisite to induce a shift of power and favor empowerment. This shift of power often translates into a **transfer of money** to help citizens to develop and finance their own initiatives. The mechanism to get funding is different from one pilot site to the other and demonstrates different levels of trust towards citizens. In Seraing, a call for proposals has been launched to select citizens’

projects that would benefit from financial support. However, the application file was quite difficult to set up and the exercise was probably not within the reach of everyone. One ASBL indeed explained that they wrote the application because it was very abstract and inaccessible for the citizens who participated to the development of the idea. Help with alternative funding is also provided by Ephata in Eupen. In Verviers, the social workers also consider that citizens have the “physical” capacity to develop project, but that they need support for administrative procedures such as funding applications. In Heerlen, citizens are therefore not asked to write an application file, they just have to send a photo to justify how the “Gebrookerbos fund” was used, once their project is completed.

This lighter process adopted by the Brooker and government is a concrete proof of their trust in the citizens, but also of their openness to delegate power and to lose part of their power. In addition, simplifying the fund allocation process is a way to ensure that any citizen who wants to start a project is able to do so. On the contrary, the complex procedures in the other cities can discourage inhabitants and make them feel like they are not capable to launch their initiatives and obliged to ask for help. Moreover, citizens’ projects are selected by the City on the basis of criteria, which are defined on a top-down manner. Citizens’ proposals thus go through several filters before having a chance to be tested in the field. Classical and rigid procedures could thus maintain the hierarchical *statu quo* rather than favor inhabitants’ empowerment. The shift of power is therefore not only a question of money, but also a matter of **freedom left to the citizens**: freedom to experiment, to make mistakes, to dream, to change their minds...

Actually, local authorities sometimes tend to keep control over citizens’ projects so that they align with their own vision of the neighborhoods. That is also the reason why some pilot projects did not get further than citizen consultation in a place-based approach of neighborhood regeneration. In Liège-Droixhe, inhabitants were consulted about the park and they also got a lot of information about the human, technical or financial constraints of such a regeneration project. The participation is therefore seen as an opportunity to raise citizens’ awareness about the available resources that frame the possible interventions. The shift of power thus goes in hand with a **transfer of responsibilities**. The benefit is that citizens can suggest ideas that are feasible, because they have access to all the information needed to understand the limits of the project.

Beyond this essential transparency, sharing constraints with inhabitants is a way to show them that it is not that simple to change the neighborhood and to value the daily work of the municipal administration. This **transfer of experience** from the city to the citizens is very important, but it should not prevent the citizens from making their own experiences through their own initiatives. In Heerlen, local authorities let go more and do not apply their veto to projects that they consider less realistic. Even if some projects fail, many were successfully conducted and inhabitants are very proud of their realizations. In a less strict framework, they still developed a sense of responsibility and an understanding of the constraints, but also **autonomy and ownership**. It was also the case in Genk for the Labiomista project, but the difference with Heerlen is that only a very small group of highly motivated citizens with specific skills have come to this point.

Changing roles

The N-power project also aimed to introduce and experiment new roles within the City governance in order to foster empowerment. The main idea is to overcome the dual relationship between citizens and local authorities and to progressively change their usual tasks and responsibilities. As explained earlier, local authorities try to let go more and to give more power to citizens, meaning that municipal agents either become facilitators and work in close collaboration with social workers as in Liège, Seraing, Verviers, Aachen and Eupen, or develop new roles as in Genk and Heerlen. The huge difference between the two groups is that project managers and neighbourhood managers are either taking on this role in parallel with usual business, or 100%-dedicated to the project. We therefore observe a different consideration for the facilitation tasks, which are envisioned as **a satellite task or a work per se**.

Yet, the N-power results show that managing and facilitating neighbourhood development is a very complex work that requires many skills. The Brooker or neighbourhood manager can indeed wear many hats, that can also be delegated to additional actors:

- Translator of the citizens' and local authorities different languages and practices;
- Expectation manager, who understand the wishes and needs of both municipal and citizen sides;
- Contact person easing balanced interactions between citizens and authorities;
- Animator of participatory activities or other collective events;
- Trusted third party ensuring a neutral and careful listening;
- Provider of federative opportunities, events and spaces;
- Official supporter of citizens' initiatives, etc.

In all cities, the field social workers are essential key players. However, in Seraing and in other cities, some local authorities still consider social work as "secondary" while it should be a "core business" with long-term investment. The associative network is another key stakeholder. In Seraing for instance, local organizations help citizens to develop their initiatives by conducting participatory processes and reporting the results to the City. In Heerlen, one citizen even organized some citizen consultation by himself. As explained by the Brooker, bottom-up participation is a way to switch roles since inhabitants are the ones that suggest an idea or a plan to the local authorities, who react to the proposal and offer their help to support the project. However, this switch requires time to change the current mindset of all stakeholders. In Seraing, the associative network estimates that citizens still need a push to start a new project, but they are becoming more and more autonomous as it progresses. In that regard, Eupen works on a **transfer of engagement**, starting with low citizen involvement and high involvement of the City and the intermediate actors, and progressively inverting the intensity of stakeholders' involvement.

In this sense, citizens' role evolves too and they become **the managers of their own projects**. In general, those projects concern a large number of inhabitants who were not involved in the co-design or the co-construction phase. Therefore, citizens are either initiators/ambassadors or consumers/beneficiaries, the latter receiving the project in a more or less favourable way. In Liège for instance, participants in the consultation processes fear that the new installations could be deteriorated by the public. In Liège and in Seraing, some citizens decided not to participate at all because they fatalistically think that there is no point in running a project that will be destroyed quickly after it is completed. On the contrary, the Nomadgroup in Genk was eager to open the place to the public but they soon realized that it is difficult to please everyone. While there were many visitors from Labiomista enjoying the gipsy wagons, a conflict arose with the neighbours complaining about the noise pollution. A working group of local residents was created to determine a settlement and reduce tensions, which makes people realize that even inhabitants' ideas, needs and wishes are not always suitable for the whole neighbourhood. In the same way, the permit for the dog park in Genk Centrum was refused because of some residents' objection.

5.2. Empowerment

5.2.1. Methods and tools

During the N-power project, the pilot neighbourhoods experimented various empowerment methods and tools. Once again, we note that the different cities have not the same starting point and some methods and tools that can seem quite usual in one city can appear as a total novelty in another city. In Liège, we even observe that the artistic approach that was developed in Saint-Léonard is way more advanced and original than the consultation process conducted in Droixhe.

Actually, the different Cities mainly wanted to **improve their current practices** and to address citizens' frustration with previous participatory experiences. In Droixhe and Eupen, "classical" consultation workshops were organized in order to first bring out citizens' needs and then develop ideas according to several topics. This kind of participatory process is far from being new and is probably not enough to

reach empowerment since citizens remain advisors rather than actors. However, this first step was needed to regain inhabitants' trust by showing them that they have **a real voice and an influence** on their living environment. In Aachen, the project mainly acted on citizens' self-confidence by increasing their **individual skills and knowledge**. In all those cases, the following steps will be to help citizens to propose their own projects and act concretely on their neighbourhoods. In Verviers and in Saint-Léonard, citizens were directly invited to contribute in more **active phases of co-construction or co-creation**, which enables them to develop new skills and to see the effect of their participation more directly. In Verviers, some (anonymous) inhabitants even started/continued to paint and decorate urban furniture by themselves after a workshop was organized. In Genk centrum, many small activities and events were also organized so that citizens meet and embellish their environment, but some inhabitants also developed their own initiatives thanks to a starter funding. In the same way, the call for proposals in Seraing provides a temporary structure to support **autonomous citizens' initiatives**. In Genk, Nomadland is a good example of citizens' active involvement but remains the original idea of the Labiomista artist, while inhabitants are more autonomous in Heerlen. In that city, the number of bottom-up micro initiatives is constantly increasing and form a **community network** that still lacks in the other cities.

By reviewing all N-power pilot projects, we observe that the methods and tools that were used are relatively simple and that the most advanced ones are not necessarily more complicated. Actually, the innovation generally lies in the removal of binding steps for the citizens or control points for the local authorities. Citizen empowerment requires dedicating human, technical and financial resources but also daring to keep things simple and to limit the length and complexity of procedures. However, this is a very slow and evolutive process, which means that all the previously listed approaches can be valid at some point depending of **the neighbourhood participatory historic and stakeholders' mindset**. Indeed, it is unrealistic to expect citizens to initiate their own projects autonomously if nothing has been done in this sense before. It is therefore important to accept that empowerment requires steps, starting with building trust and developing the individual capacities of citizens before involving them more actively and letting them undertake projects alone. However, N-power allow exchanges between the different sites and probably inspired new practices and accelerated the empowerment processes. Some cities are still lagging behind others, but they are aware of the progress they still have to make and the results they can expect if they continue their efforts.

5.2.2. Project-based or community-based strategies

Through the N-power project, we identify two different empowerment strategies.

First, **community-based empowerment** starts from the field, from the living forces of the neighborhood and relies on the pre-existing network of inhabitants who share values and experiences. In a bottom-up way, the wishes and the needs of the whole community are expressed, transformed into ideas and finally implemented through concrete projects. In this manner, the projects are progressively integrated in the City agenda and benefit from a strong legitimacy. However, each unique project is very local and requires the existence of a strong community;

Second, **project-based empowerment** is more theoretical and focuses on the development of an institutional global strategy that will incorporate diverse citizens' initiatives. In a top-down manner, a structured framework is provided to support and efficiently develop inhabitants' ideas. In this way, every project benefits from the same accompaniment and becomes part of a general dynamic orchestrated by an official actor (e.g. a Brooker). This approach yet presents the drawback to blur the roles of this actor and the inhabitants, and to mainly attract highly-skilled and enterprising citizens.

Those two strategies are not exclusive and there is often a mix between them. The following list is an attempt to categorize the nine pilot projects on a continuous spectrum from community- to project-based projects:

- Community-based:

- > Eupen, because of its strong religious community;
- > Seraing, because of its strong associative network;
- > Saint-Léonard, because there is a neighborhood dynamic and many local organizations;
- More community-based:
 - > Verviers, because there is no global agenda and a real willingness to reach out the community;
 - > Nomadland, because the project is led by a specific citizen group;
- More project-based:
 - > Droixhe, because the park is a top-down project but they are still looking for a community;
 - > Aachen, because this is a top-down project of education but dedicated to a specific community of young jobseekers and future professionals;
- Project-based:
 - > Genk Centrum, because the formal neighborhood development approach is developed to support citizens' initiatives.
 - > Heerlen, because the macro Gebrookerbos method is supporting micro citizens' initiatives;

It should also be noted that neither of the two “project-led” or “community-led” approaches is better than the other. However, there should be an alignment between the empowerment strategy chosen and the associated participatory processes. For instance, the Droixhe project is theoretically very community-based but this community does not exist yet and the consultation process is quite constrained by the City agenda. On the contrary, the Nomadland project is supposed to be project-led but finally works with a very limited group of inhabitants, which illustrates that the framework actually favors one specific initiative. Those observations show a different understanding of the concept of empowerment in the different cities, as well as a potential disconnection between the ambitions expressed at the beginning of the project and the process finally implemented.

5.2.3. Participatory awareness and recognition

The gap between the goals and the results of some N-power pilot projects also comes from the maturity of the different cities regarding citizen participation. Indeed, every neighbourhood manager had great intentions in the beginning, but they were sometimes difficult to put into practice. Faced with the reality on the ground, two **coping strategies** have been put in place.

Firstly, some Cities decided to humbly lower their ambitions along the way. For instance in Seraing, the creation of a neighbourhood committee was abandoned because that it would be redundant with the local associations that are the first contact point for citizens. For Liège, it was more difficult to accept to “abandon” some parts of the project, such as the co-construction or co-management of the pond park. Actually, those two objectives are still planned but it will probably happen after the end of N-power project, because it took time to complete the co-design phase. It was not realistic to expect more engagement from citizens at this stage regarding their current levels of trust and leadership, but also the reluctance of some City services to move beyond consultation. The same lack of political will was encountered in Verviers, where the project manager did **small interventions** with the means at hand and the support of the social workers.

Secondly, the Cities became aware that the collaborative design or construction of one neighbourhood space **require specific expertise** that the City does not always have in-house. In Eupen, Liège and Seraing, the project aimed at renovating and developing parks with citizens; and the project in Genk partly aimed at greening the city centre. Therefore, external actors (e.g. architecture and urbanism offices, collectives of artists or consultants) were hired to design those parks and/or conduct the participatory processes. Those collaborations however sometimes raised new tensions when the external consultants did not have sufficient knowledge of the local context leading to unsatisfactory design proposals or to conflicts with inhabitants. Those experiences show at the same time the importance to have a neutral expert facilitator and to have a local knowledge holder. In Heerlen, the process is therefore facilitated by a local independent Brooker, an official account manager and a

neutral engagement marketer, who is conducting a scientific research about the Gebrookerbos method. In Aachen too, the University is involved in the project in order to provide digital training to citizens.

Despite the innovative method developed in Heerlen, the Brooker still mentions that is very difficult to manage **different organizational patterns**: tailored and bottom-up citizens' initiatives, *versus* rigid and top-down official procedures and policies. There is a growing awareness about the challenges of such empowerment practices at the neighbourhood level. In particular, a cultural shift is needed to change both stakeholders' mindset, integrating flexibility in the municipality vision and encouraging citizens' entrepreneurial spirit. This profound transformation of usual practices definitely calls for intermediate actors, which will have no personal stakes at hand and support the process in the long run. We note that Heerlen is the most advanced city in this respect and however still faces those issues, while the other cities are not yet fully aware of all the challenges, and especially of the resources to invest in this transition towards more citizen empowerment.

Moreover, this empowerment is not yet recognized as something crucial and citizens' work and participation are not always considered at fair value. Politics sometimes just assume that citizens want to get involved and that the mere fact of participating is reward enough in itself. Yet, inhabitants usually do not have the time or the possibility to engage, meaning that they sometimes make sacrifices from their work or family life to be present for consultations or other events. Therefore, participating is a work per se, from which citizens expect concrete results. It is therefore very important to recognize and highlight this work. In Droixhe, citizens are rather satisfied with the pond park because they see their input in the final design, which is not a common practice for them. In Eupen too, citizens realized that they can have an influence on the park Loten project, while in Verviers they are recognized as actors rather than passive beneficiaries of municipal projects. We can therefore tell that the N-power project at least provided a feeling of being listened to for Walloon citizens, while they developed a feeling of being able to build or manage something in Heerlen or Genk for instance.

5.3. Barriers and their impacts on the pilot projects

5.3.1. The Covid-19 pandemic

Like the whole world, the N-power project has suffered from the Covid-19 health crisis.

The first consequence is obviously **the postponement or even the cancelation of many activities**, especially participatory events, that were supposed to occur during the project. The huge difference between the pilot neighborhoods is the status of the project at the time the pandemic began in March 2020. In Genk and Heerlen, citizens' initiatives were already well advanced while in the Walloon cities, project managers were still trying to reach out to citizens. In Liège, the pandemic had a moderate effect for the pilot "I write in the city" because the project was already completed in Saint-Léonard but still ongoing in Droixhe. Due to the closing of the libraries, the first writing workshops were simply held outside rather than inside the Droixhe library. For the pilot "Around the pond", the collective workshops were just about to begin, but it was finally a good thing to postpone the whole process rather than taking a long break between the start and the end of the project. Moreover, the delay of several months was also a driver to keep a steady pace once the project finally started. In Nomadland, the Covid impact was limited because the collective definition of the project was already done and the group was soon permitted to meet outside, on the construction site, in order to build the gipsy wagons. We could say that the pandemic could even be an opportunity wondering if the citizens would have had the time to build the gipsy wagons without the Covid-19 limitations. However, the restaurant sector has been at a standstill for a long time and the number of visitors in Labiomista was limited. In Seraing, the pandemic further slowed down the project as the delivery of the materials needed to redevelop the parks was delayed. In Aachen, the cancellation of collective activities was even more damaging because the whole project was based on the continuous training of inhabitants. This inability to bring people together and to meet physically was also reported in Verviers, Seraing, Liège, Genk Centrum, Heerlen and Eupen.

One of the reasons why it was so difficult to maintain a neighborhood dynamic during the pandemic is the **digital divide**, which is quite huge in such deprived communities. Indeed, the local authorities could pursue their daily work without too much difficulty thanks to phone and video calls with colleagues, but this was a whole different story to keep in touch with the inhabitants without being on the field during the lockdowns. This problem was exacerbated during winter because even outside meetings were impossible. In Liège, some individual face-to-face meetings were thus organized with citizens to finish the consultation process and show citizens that the project will not be abandoned due to the Covid.

Another consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic is **the change in the relationship with others and the community**. According to the social workers, this phenomenon is maybe the more problematic because it is a long-term psychological effect, while the cancellation of events is a more periodic interdiction depending on the spread of the virus. Indeed, the practical organization of events and gatherings have already been able to start again thanks to the vaccine, the health pass and increased precautionary measures. On the contrary, people are still affected by the Covid situation and many inhabitants have developed **a fear of the virus, but also a fear of others**. After living in isolation for months at a time, some residents have lost some social skills and it will take time for them to resume a social life. On the contrary, other inhabitants are looking to get back in touch and active as soon as possible and want to be more involved in their community than before Covid. The health crisis therefore induces a little turnover of citizens that get involved in the N-power project and more globally in their neighbourhoods. In Verviers and Seraing, seniors and new people that never participated before have suddenly become more present in some activities because they felt isolated and suffered from “social precarity” (rather than economical or intellectual precarity).

Even if it will take time to regain momentum, the project managers estimate that the pandemic did not reduce the motivation nor discourage citizens to get engaged. Indeed, inhabitants still dream of an “after-Covid normal life” and are in need of social ties and future projects. Thus, the pandemic does not seem to have stopped the project, but simply **reduced its pace**. In Heerlen, some new projects even started during the health crisis such as a flower distribution in elderly houses for instance.

In addition to the health crisis, further delay happened in Verviers and Aachen due to severe flooding in July 2021. The floods also deeply affected Liège, but Droixhe was spared. Compared to the other neighbourhoods, citizens of Prés-Javais are especially demotivated because not much concrete has happened in the neighbourhood in over a year. There is thus a transformation of previously “motivated participants” into “hard-to-reach citizens”.

5.3.2. City administrative and financial rules

In all neighbourhoods, the City administrative and financial rules were considered huge constraints to empowerment. Indeed, even the smallest projects often requested administrative authorizations from the City (e.g., compost in Verviers, call for projects in Seraing, signage in Saint-Léonard, frescoes in Droixhe and Verviers). In Genk centrum, a mural painting project is on hold because the City want to have a say about this project, considering that the considered wall is located at a strategic location in the City. Some projects required further permissions for security reasons (e.g. barbecues in Seraing and Eupen) or ownership issues (e.g. gipsy wagons owned by the city, Bongaard park owned by a housing corporation). For bigger planning interventions, urban permits are needed (e.g. playground, sport facilities, green auditorium and new path in park Loten; fountain, paths and benches in pond park). Those procedures are long and laborious, explaining partly the slow implementation pace of some projects. There is thus a discrepancy between the city speed of realization and the citizens’ expectations. However, the N-power agenda sometimes put a little pressure to accelerate the administrative rhythm, even during the Covid-19 pandemic.

5.3.3. Hard-to-reach groups

The N-power project was specifically designed to work with deprived communities, which are known to be more difficult to engage in participatory processes. This phenomenon was observed during the project and diverse “hard-to-reach” groups were identified in each pilot project (see Table 1). It is very hard to reach out people that already experience day-to-day difficulties. According to the social field workers, some inhabitants have **other personal priorities, responsibilities and preoccupations** before being able to participate and to get involved in the neighborhood community. It is not that they are uninterested or not motivated, but rather that they first have to deal with more urgent issues in their lives.

City	Hard-to-reach	Usual participants
Genk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Local residents - Families and youth - Diverse communities - Vulnerable groups - Seniors, because they already engaged a lot in the past 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - One active group for Nomadland, with specific skills - Visitors of Labiomista
Liège	People who are unemployed or looking for work	Mix of people from the associative network and regular citizens
Seraing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Isolated people who do not belong to an association - People over 50 	Youth and people from the associative network
Eupen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Multicultural communities - Young people - Long-term participants, following the project from A to Z 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Older Belgian participants - Dutch-speaking people - Only 20% of participants from a foreign culture
Verviers	Citizens that already expressed their meaning in former participatory initiatives, which seem redundant and ineffective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Socio-economic privileged class - Always motivated/active groups - Punctual participation of vulnerable citizens
Aachen	Disadvantaged inhabitants, migrants and unemployed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Youth and elderly from high or middle socio-economic class
Heerlen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More vulnerable population - Hard to keep volunteers that already engaged a lot in the past 	Initiators are generally middle-class

Table 1 – Hard-to-reach and usual participants in each neighborhood pilot projects.

The above table shows similar problems of citizen recruitment across the different pilot sites. We also observe that Heerlen and Genk rather work with particularly active groups of citizens to launch new projects. The advantage of this approach is that there are quick changes in the neighborhood that can in turn inspire less active groups to get involved in the future. However, always working with the same group also presents the risk to only consider one portion of the population, and to create conflicts with other groups. However, every citizen is welcome to participate and seeing (positive or negative) changes in their neighborhood can motivate people to personally or collectively act on their living environment.

Through the project, five additional issues explain that is sometimes hard to reach some citizens:

- The high turnover of temporary inhabitants in Genk centrum does not favor long-term involvement;
- The lack of meeting places and neighborhood committee in Droixhe or Genk, which could constitute a repair for citizens;
- The lack of identity in Droixhe or Eupen, which does not favor a willingness to gather together to regenerate the neighborhood;

- The physical barriers within the neighborhood, such as rivers in Liège and Verviers or the railway in Seraing, which create social separation between the inhabitants and a lack of social cohesion;
- The low visibility of the pilot parks in Seraing and Eupen, making it difficult for citizens to consider the potential of the project.

5.4. Sustainability

The previous sections showed interesting results and opened promising avenues for the neighbourhood development through empowerment. At the end of the N-power project, the question that remains is how the methods and tools, social and governance dynamics that were developed during this project can be sustained on the longer term. N-power is indeed a 3-year research action project and we can wonder how this time-limited approach can continue after its completion.

In participatory and co-design research projects, it is common that researchers leave the field when one space, one object or one policy has been constructed or implemented. In those cases, the research subject is the participatory design of one product or the development of one new facilitation method to reach concrete results. In the N-power project, the action research rather aims to initiate a change in usual practices. Even though many initiatives were concretely realized in the pilot neighbourhoods, this does not mean that the project is finished. More globally, N-power has no clear start nor end in the various cities. Indeed, it is part of a larger **temporal and cultural framework**, each City having its own historic in terms of citizen participation and neighbourhood development. It was therefore not always easy for us to unravel the progress of each project, identify pre-existing conditions and recent contributions.

Cities like Heerlen, Genk or even Aachen were more advanced than the Walloon cities in terms of neighbourhood development when the project started. Therefore, Walloon cities saw the N-power project as a new “playground” to test different approaches but the expectations were quite low since it was a first trial-and-error experiment. In this case, every new experience was good to take but N-power remains one project among others, which is limited to a single neighbourhood and not part of a more global strategy. On the contrary, the Dutch, Flemish and German cities had already institutionalized some methods and envisioned N-power as an opportunity to evaluate and improve their current practices. In the future, there is a greater likelihood that these cities will keep the momentum going, while there is more uncertainty regarding the Walloon cities that just started to totally question the way they operate.

Nevertheless, we are convinced that **N-power has initiated an essential change of mentality** among certain actors, who will be able to become ambassadors of the importance of empowerment and convince their still sceptical colleagues. However, this butterfly effect can only take place if these ambassadors are stabilized, either by allowing them to undertake new projects like N-power more often, or by creating new dedicated positions. This can be done by maintaining the project manager as a neighbourhood manager, as in Eupen, or by setting up a larger-scale dynamic, as is the case in Flanders and the Netherlands. In both cases, the process is progressive and will take time to diffuse the concept of empowerment through all political and administrative layers. Many pilot cities are therefore already looking for additional funding to perpetuate their actions after the end of N-power.

Citizen engagement takes time, goes far beyond simple communication and requires real mobilization. When it is the first empowerment attempt, it is illusory to expect successful and immediate results within the limited time frame of a project such as N-power. Cities that only just started their efforts towards empowerment during N-power did obviously **not achieve the same results** as cities that were more advanced in this field. The differences between the different pilot projects are however encouraging. They show the progress that can be expected in the future by investing continuous efforts in neighbourhoods, which are currently less receptive. The pandemic has also shown that stopping the effort even momentarily requires starting some things from the beginning. While some iterations are necessary, we also note that one never starts from scratch.

In this research, empowerment appears to us as a real commitment, both of the local authorities and the inhabitants. However, we observe that the first step must come from the City, because most of the districts suffer from a lack of trust and a weariness of the citizens due to broken promises. In this context, intermediate actors such as neighbourhood managers are thus essential to recreate a healthy dialog and a long-term relationship between stakeholders. However, the **sustainability of those intermediate roles** is also an important element. During the project, the project managers and neighbourhood managers sometimes changed, which created a loss of information, a loss of experience and discontinuities in the monitoring of the process. Moreover, this is very challenging for citizens who had developed a trusting relationship with one person and must now turn to someone else. For instance, new contacts had to be created after the recent retirement of the experienced Brooker in Heerlen or the replacement of one popular neighbourhood manager in Genk Centrum. Furthermore, newcomers also need to get to know the neighbourhood, the people and their past background. It was indeed much more difficult for the project manager of Verviers, who was new in the City, than the ones in Liège who had already worked in those neighbourhoods for years before N-power. In the same way, despite the community worker in Genk Centrum was new in this specific neighbourhood, this had little impact on the smooth running of the project as she already had a lot of experience from previous work in other areas of Genk.

Finally, we would also emphasize one paradox regarding the sustainability of the neighborhood approach. On the one hand, there is a need to stabilize the neighborhood administrative structure through **permanent actors**. Indeed, in the cases of Seraing and Verviers, the project managers were hired only for the duration of the N-power project, which does not ensure any continuity of the project in the administration. On the other hand, this is not necessarily essential to build permanent installations to develop the neighborhood. Indeed, each City already has some development plans but they take years or even decades to materialize. This slow rhythm can be discouraging for citizens and **temporary small-scale interventions** are therefore a more effective mean to give them a more direct and concrete hold on their neighborhood. This kind of tactical city planning therefore becomes a way to motivate and empower citizens in the longer run.

6. Conclusions and perspectives

The project took place in seven cities that have a lot in common, but also some differences, especially in terms of experience with neighbourhood development. Some cities were more advanced when the project started (Heerlen, Genk or even Aachen) and obviously did not achieve the same results than less experienced cities (Seraing, Verviers, Liège and Eupen). The differences observed from one pilot to another illustrate variable levels of understanding, willingness and capacity (cultural, organisational, technical, etc.) to implement empowerment projects.

Although some Cities are progressively supporting more active citizenship, the tools and methods implemented so far generally fail to create opportunities for community empowerment. In most cities, there is an obvious lack of shared know-how on how to facilitate personal empowerment (PE) and community empowerment (CE). It is therefore crucial to foster the stabilization of a formal urban regeneration programme and a city department dedicated to neighbourhood management.

It has been shown that individuals do not become self-sufficient on their own. It is only once the individuals have more confidence (personal empowerment) and feel comfortable interacting with their environment (place-based empowerment), that they relate to others and their direct environment, confirming that community empowerment is linked to and depends on other forms of empowerments. Intermediary actors such as neighbourhood managers are therefore essential to recreate a healthy dialogue and a long-term relationship between stakeholders. It is also important to ensure the sustainability of these intermediary roles. Indeed, the turnover of some project leaders and neighbourhood managers has led to a loss of information, a loss of experience and discontinuities in the process. Moreover, this situation is very difficult for citizens who had developed a relationship of trust with one person and have to start again.

In addition, one of the main challenges was the lack of political support during the project. This was demonstrated during a meeting that was organised with the elected representatives of all the partner cities but where in the end no representative came (except for Genk). Although it is very enriching to learn from other experiences, they cannot always be transferred if the decision-makers are not there to hear and support them. Indeed, project managers cannot always act because they do not have the power to make formal decisions. Moreover, some cities are not yet ready to transfer their power, so there is still work to be done to change the mindset of the cities.

Finally, it should be noted that certain “tensions” generally had an impact on the project outcomes:

- The partners’ willingness to learn from each other was undermined by language barriers;
- The timeframe of the project (only three years) does not correspond to the time actually needed to create a network (generally around ten years);
- The flexibility needed to set up tailor-made participatory processes is in contrast to the rigidity of the rules set in advance by Interreg funding.

Limits

Through the writing of this report, we realized that it is sometimes very hard to know what is prior to the project, what is really part of it or what is an unrealized intention. Some of the phenomena described in the report are therefore more general than the N-power project specifically, as they started before and will probably continue beyond. Thus, the intended goals and concrete actions intertwine and feed into each other in an iterative way, which sometimes complicates our understanding of them. In addition, the various pilot projects have built on each other, sometimes leading to revisions of original goals and new ideas without necessarily being documented as a change in plan. This is however normal in the context an action research that aims to create knowledge through *in situ* experience.

Perspectives

Many cities originally aimed to co-manage (ephemeral or permanent) projects with citizens, but this step is difficult to reach. So far, only the cities of Heerlen and Genk have succeeded in getting citizens to manage some projects themselves, but these are still dependent on N-power or other funding. The

N-power project has initiated thinking about how to nurture and sustain citizen projects over time, but this is probably the one area that still needs to be explored further by cities in the future. Several of them have started to think about alternative financing (sponsors, crowdfunding or volunteering) but, at the moment, citizen projects are still financially dependent on the city.

Apart from the funds available, other figures are of great importance in the project. In particular, there is often still too much interest in how many events were organized, how many methods were developed, how many people took part in each initiative... rather than whether the participants had a good experience or whether the method used was effective. In the future, it would therefore be interesting to broaden the evaluation of the project to the opinion of the participants themselves. Of course, we interviewed some citizens, but not enough to have a representative idea of their feelings and of the way they wish to invest themselves in the future. It is also very difficult for the project managers to estimate with certainty how the empowerment of citizens and communities has evolved during the project. In addition, the actors involved in the project need to step back to better visualize the impact of N-power on their usual practices.